

THE HAVEN

By Sarah Reynolds

When one remembers in an adopted language, there is a dividing line in that remembrance. What came before could be someone else's life; it might as well be fiction.

Yiyun Li

1995

A cold, hard smack as the earth rises up to meet her face. Her cheek squelches against the glistening mud and she lies dazed for a moment, a stinking slop oozing between her outstretched fingers. Her jacket has ridden up her midriff; cold nips of rain pluck at her exposed skin. She begins to move, but her limbs are sluggish, she cannot get a purchase on the sucking mud and before she can gather her strength, his fist is in her hair. A blaze of pain across her scalp as he hauls her to her knees, twisting back her head so that she gulps at the air, rainwater drumming into her open mouth. For a brief moment she faces the fading expanse of the sky. There is a sound like crunching gravel and her mouth fills with a metallic shock of blood.

When she comes to, she is on her back, eyelids heavy with mud, mouth jangling loose teeth, his boot on her sternum, a word attached to each stamp of his heel: You. Stupid. Little. Bitch.

The rain steals his words. It falls now in thick ropes, flogging the field, a deluge to deafen the gods. So much water that it seems to gather beneath her, to raise her up on its altar. She will drown after all; a spider under the shower head, blindly floundering on heels and elbows. But Terry will not give her up to the rain.

His anger focuses into quiet concentration as his fingers tighten around her throat. She thrashes in her panic, bucking like a speared fish. Black spots jostle before her eyes and she is certain that she's been here before: the wet creep of cold, the slow dislocation of time, a sliding elision between that first moment and this – her last.

She is back in the lake, being sucked into its darkening mouth and just as before, Terry looms above her, crowned with sunlight, or perhaps it is the moon. A white disc of

light streams towards her. In its penumbra, Terry is a gargoyle, eyes bulging, cheeks shaking with exertion, rain bubbling over his bared teeth. She reads the words that curl off his lips: I should have let you drown.

Then, with a sudden jerk of submission, she lets go.

Peace rushes in like water, swelling her up, claiming her for heaven. Floating in a dazzling light, she hears a distant noise below her, the scrape of blade on stone. A warm breath in her ear, ardent and tender, and though she does not know the words, she understands their meaning; she is coming home.

Roedale, Surrey, 2015.

Kate gazed out of the window and wondered if she was unravelling again, for there – sitting on the back wall in the moonlight, sucking on a cigarette and breathing out darkness – was Emma. It was four fifteen on a sludge-grey morning in September. The baby had been waking every two hours. Curled in the bowl of her Papasan chair, Kate held her son to her breast and tried to blink the image of Emma from her mind.

Dr Chundra had said this might happen. It had never been ‘Black Dogs’ for Kate, rather an obfuscating mist that collected around her thoughts, like the bloom on fruit. Anything could set it off: lack of sleep, low blood sugar, anxiety, grief, hormonal imbalance – the very business of living. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and attempted to make a clear pool of her mind, to still each ripple of inquisitive thought.

The capillaries of her eyelids bled into the red of the shoe. It was in a sandwich bag; the kind her mum used for her daily liver sausage sarnies. The policewoman held it up like a trophy.

“Are you familiar with this item?”

“Item?”

“She means the shoe, darling.”

It was suede, Converse, her favourite; of course she was familiar with it.

“It’s Emma’s.”

She carried that day with her always, returning to it like a loose tooth she couldn’t stop worrying with her tongue. And every time she replayed the scene, she saw something different. The older she got, the more she saw so that she was no longer certain what was real and what she had imagined. She closed her eyes and saw the daisies Tippexed on Emma’s DM’s.

She must focus on the present moment: the dull pulse of the clock, the baby's rhythmic chug, the medical scent of nappy cream. She ran the tip of her finger along the snail coil of her baby's ear. Was Emma still out there, in the dark, waiting? Why, Kate wondered, was it always Emma that came? Not her dead dad, not the boyfriend who'd hung himself, not any of the sixteen bodies whose deaths she'd reported during her time at The Advertiser – Emma.

They'd been sitting on the wall in Kate's back garden, smoking Marlboro Menthols and dangling their legs down into the alley that led from Kate's street to Emma's – 'Dog Shit Alley,' they called it. Emma was almost shy, as she tugged the brown envelope out of her bag. It was big as a folder and sealed with brown packing tape.

"Don't read it," Emma said, her fingertips still clinging to the envelope, "Just give it to your Mum. She'll know what to do with it."

"What is it?"

"My memoir."

"What? – Why are you giving your 'memoir' to my mum?"

"In case."

"In case of what?"

She shrugged. "Just in case."

Then, with a flick of fag ash, the subject was dismissed.

They returned to talk of the band that was going to be playing at The Red Lion and the chances of getting served there.

"I'm probably not gonna go."

"But *The Zeitgeist* will be playing and Sophie actually talked to Cory last time we were there."

“What kind of name is Cory anyway?”

“American. His Dad was on Oprah. He wrote that book, *The Inner Goddess*. My mum’s always blathering on about her inner goddess now. Dad says it’s like her bible or something.”

Emma blew a smoke ring out into the alley. Its sombre wreath hung on the cold grey air like a spectre.

“Did you know that Georgina Perks got off with Tom Carson?” said Kate.

“So?”

“Come on, Tom Carson! He’s... diet coke!”

Kate’s group of friends had developed their own system for rating a boy’s attractiveness based on the amount of alcohol they’d need to drink before they’d be willing to snog him. Emma shrugged. She hadn’t spent time with ‘the girls’ for months.

“So why can’t you come to The Red Lion?”

“Busy.”

“Doing...?”

“Nothing. Everything.”

She smiled at Kate. Newly relieved of their braces, her teeth were straight and strong, every crooked trace of childhood erased.

“Do you want me to cover for you?” said Kate.

“Would you?”

“Yeah... *if*...”

Emma took a drag on her cigarette, raised her eyebrows.

“If...?”

“If you tell me one thing about him.”

Emma squinted at the copse beyond the fence. A crisp breeze shivered through the leaves, Laurel and hazel bushes jostling against a strangle of briars. The flicker of a smile as she turned her face back towards Kate.

“He’s diet coke,” she said.

The metallic squeal of the kitchen window served as the Barton family’s dinner gong. Glancing back up at the house, Kate tossed the stump of her cigarette into the alley.

“I’d better go.”

Her mother’s voice reached down the garden like an inquisitive tentacle:

“Girls? Is Emma staying for tea?”

“Tell your Mum thanks – another time,” said Emma, scrambling to her feet and chucking her bag down into the alley. She jumped after it, ungainly in her clumpy boots. Or perhaps they were trainers.

In the murky light of the alley her face was small, urchin pale. Her lips parted for a moment as if an errant thought might tumble free. She drew it back into herself with a drag on her cigarette. Hauling her bag onto one shoulder, she swivelled on her heel, crunching gravel as she trudged away. Kate watched as the grainy light of dusk smudged Emma’s edges, dissolved her form until there was nothing left but the firefly tip of her cigarette bobbing through the shadows. Emma paused for a moment at the end of the alley and called up through the gloom.

“Later!”

She rounded the corner and the brazen tip of her cigarette was extinguished.

#

Digital time glowed on the bedside table. 04:26. Kate would not look out of the window. Not yet. Not until the clock read 04:45. Nineteen minutes. She must not think of it. She must think only of the present moment. Her eyes fell on the tumble of unwashed laundry in the corner; the dust-furred mantelpiece; the broken spine of a parenting book. She watched a spider trickle down the bedside table.

The sound of scrunching duvet jolted Kate from her thoughts. There was a man in her bed. Lawrence slept with his arms thrown back in childlike abandon, a gelatinous thread of saliva strung between his gaping jaws. She felt a sudden swelling in her chest at the sight of him; long tanned limbs spattered with chocolatey freckles; sparse tufts of hair along his breastbone. Even after five years, his presence felt novel; for so long, it had been just Kate and Jade.

The baby in Kate's arms was snoring. Her nipple slipped from his mouth, launching a javelin of blue-grey milk through the air. She fumbled around for a breast pad. She could never find the things. They'd flutter off surfaces and slide down sofa cushions, only to reappear suddenly and inappropriately on the sole of her father-in-law's shoe or squashed under a coffee cup, having been mistaken for a coaster. She patted the nipple with her pyjama top and watched the stain deepen. Her eyes drifted towards the neon numbers on the clock. 04:33. Not yet. She would deal with the baby first.

Holding his sleeping body away from her own, Kate eased herself up from the chair, letting her knees absorb the movement as she rose. The baby sighed. Kate froze, her mouth a pantomime grimace. She waited until his breaths had steadied before moving again, weighing each slow, creaking movement of her limbs against the danger of his waking. Fifteen steps to the Moses-basket: six from the bay window to the foot of the bed, six towards the back wall, three to navigate the cradle. With each step, she

watched her shadow loom on the back wall, a darkness separate from herself. How liberating it would be to leave it there. Dr Chundra would have something to say about that, some neat, quasi-philosophical phrase:

But Kate, it is darkness that sets the light in relief...

She stood above the empty cradle and stared at the tiny being in her arms, his face luminescent in the moonlight. The next step required the precise, measured movements of a bomb disposal expert. Unpeeling his cheek from her arm, she lowered the sleeping baby into the crib. There was always the fleeting urge to wreck it all, to tuck away a flapping blanket or smooth a crinkle – rookie mistakes. Stepping back, she straightened her spine in triumph, stretched out her arm. The impression of his ear remained on her skin, a pink ammonite.

The clock read 04:37. Now? Not until she'd reached the window. Her eyes fixed downwards, she picked through the debris of discarded clothes and made her way towards the moon. Fifteen quick steps. Cold plate glass, millimeters from the tip of her nose. She raised her eyes. Emma was gone.

It was silly but Kate found herself scanning the rooftops for a scrambling teenager; Emma would be thirty-five by now. Kate stared into the starless night, shades of darkness shifting, skirting the glassy gaze of the moon. Next-door's Tomcat sidled along the back wall towards the allotments, their slabs of well-turned soil neat as freshly dug graves. A distant fox shriek pricked the cat's ears. He poured himself into the shadows and was gone.

She'd laugh about it in the morning – her midnight madness – marvel at the mind's ability to raise monsters from the shadows. 'The subconscious is a powerful thing' she'd say, preparing toast and tea. It wouldn't let her forget the date.

The first few years, she had commemorated the day, taken a day off work to revisit old haunts. She'd gone for long walks down by the pond, trying to imagine what she would say to Emma if she ever had the chance. On darker days, she'd picture a body, bones and teeth rattling in the sediment of a lake, a lone molar in the belly of a fish.

It was her mother who put a stop to it, earthy Clementine with her plain common sense.

"All this mawkish moping does no one any good. You're still here, alive and well so if you're not going to celebrate Emma's life, at least go and live your own."

Since then, Kate had made sure the day was like any other. She'd go to work, make supper, watch TV, go to bed. Some years she'd come close to forgetting altogether, but there'd always be something: a song on the radio, an e-mail from a school friend, a solitary magpie demanding a salute.

"Hello Mr Magpie, how's your merry wife?" Emma would always say.

Dr Chundra didn't approve of forgetting. 'What you resist, persists,' she'd say, huffing on her spectacles and rubbing away the mist. It was one of the things Kate liked most about Dr Chundra – her ability to sound like a friend, halving a problem instead of the clinical reality. She had what Clementine called 'the common touch' which was why she'd been recommended to her in the first place. Amy Hillier had had a terrible time with bulimia in her teenage years. Two years with Dr Chundra had put paid to that nonsense. It had been almost twenty years but Kate couldn't imagine a life without Dr Chundra in it.

She wondered what the Doc would make of the appeal; she wasn't a fan of social media.

'It doesn't matter what I think, Kate. It's what you think, that counts.'

But Kate wasn't sure what she thought anymore.

“Anniversaries are always a good hook for a fresh campaign,” the Police Communications Officer had said.

There’d been some interest from a TV company – one of those ‘cold case’ programmes – a ‘Missing Persons’ special. It wouldn’t come to anything – not without the family’s cooperation. Everything rested on Kate, on the words she’d delivered to a man with a video camera, in an anonymous back room at Roedale police station:

If you saw something, if you know something, please, call the number onscreen.

If you’re out there Emma, please get in touch. You don’t have to come back... just let us know that you’re safe. You always told me a story is only as good as its ending. I’m not giving up until you tell me how this story ends.

“Yeah... I might cut that last bit,” the officer had said, “Sounds a bit melodramatic. No offence.”

“None taken.”

“We’ll release the video appeal to local news networks and hope we get some hits.”

“I’m a reporter at The Advertiser. I’m on maternity leave at the moment but I’m sure I can get them to push the story.”

Kate tried to imagine Emma watching it – a grown woman now, a mother perhaps, or a billionaire businesswoman, transformed by plastic surgery and living in New York, Barbados, Dubai. Perhaps she’d send Kate a secret message, just like when they were children. A stupid thought. She banished it quickly, steering her mind back to

the present, focussing on the baby's gentle breaths. He was her priority now and he needed his mother sane.

The duvet felt deliciously warm and heavy as Kate slid under its weight. Sleep. Never in her life had it been such a luxurious delight. It was only now she had baby Bobby, that Kate realised how much Clementine had taken on with Jade, how much she had shielded Kate from the worst of motherhood. She'd had a bottle in Jade's mouth before Kate even woke from the anaesthetic. This time round, things would be different.

Kate slithered an arm across her husband's chest and pulled herself into his warmth. She loved the smell of him, something on his skin that wasn't soap, or deodorant, or aftershave, just him. She lay her head on his chest and he stirred, a murmur reverberating deep in his breast, like the hum of bees' wings. She let her eyes close, her breath deepen, a last thought before she allowed her mind to blur with the exquisite deliquescence of sleep. She should pay a visit to Sybil; no one else would.

Earlsdon Park Nursing Home, Surrey, 2015.

It was almost midday and the flowers still hadn't come. Sybil felt giddy at the possibility that they might not come at all. She stood by the window with her arms by her sides, hands balled into fists. The stiff strips of the vertical blinds quivered under her breath.

"Daft tart!" she said out loud.

It was the impetus she needed to tweak the blinds apart and peer outside. The porch was empty. She let out a jubilant snort and cast her eyes over the forecourt. Earlsdon Park was just so, its prim lawns and trimmed hedges orderly in all weathers. The only movement came from a stand of ash trees at the far end of the residents' front garden. Sybil watched their fluffy heads sway on invisible autumn currents, mesmerisingly slow, as if they were underwater.

It was a grand old place, Earlsdon Park, a Georgian mansion – listed to boot! Clive was a great admirer of Georgian architecture. Its boxy symmetry and buttoned up propriety appealed to his puritanical streak. When he'd first found the place on SuperiorResidentialServices.co.uk, he'd gushed over its features: a sweeping driveway and grand old staircase, not to mention the five mile golf-course draped over its surrounding acres. He'd declared the place perfect – the best home that money could buy! The second best, Sybil had thought, privately. The first best being already occupied by Clive himself, his new wife and his new daughter. Still, Sybil didn't mind too much. She liked to think that his becoming a father again at the age of fifty-eight was punishment enough. How old was the child by now? Nine? Ten? Sally or Sammy or something. Come to think of it, wasn't Sammy the name of Clive's childhood dog? It wouldn't be beyond Clive to name his child after a dog.

Sybil's eyes raked the driveway in search of intruders brandishing flowers. Not a soul. With her fingertip on the glass, she followed the unwavering line of the driveway towards the home. Here, the path widened to embrace a greying fountain that had been disconnected in anticipation of frost. She missed its steady sibilance in the winter months. If she stood in the exact centre of the central pane of her window, Sybil could align her nose with the valve and make her reflection appear to be taking a drink from the fountain. This was pleasing. She had her very own 'water feature'. Daytime television was always on about water features.

At that moment, Janice clattered in with a flapping clipboard and a breezy smile.

"Hello Sybil, it's time for your pills!"

Underneath her white plastic pinny, she wore a smart navy uniform with brass buttons that made Sybil think of a bellboy. She wanted to ask her why she cut her hair so short and wore no makeup. She had fine cheekbones and pretty hazel eyes. Why must she cultivate this charade of masculinity? If Sybil were her mother she would ask her bluntly, 'Don't you like being a woman?'

Sybil smiled politely and swallowed her pills. She was not Janice's mother; she was nobody's mother anymore.

"Now then Janice, I shouldn't like to create a fuss but I do hope that new coloured girl knows I don't accept flowers."

"Her name is Nora and we don't use that word anymore, Sybil. It's racist."

"Racist?"

Sybil felt rather perturbed. She didn't consider herself a racist but she was clearly no longer 'au fait' with the correct terminology. Wasn't it rather crude to refer to someone as black? Coloured sounded, to her, a much more pleasant word.

“Are you coming down for afternoon tea, Sybil? The entertainment’s due at half two.”

“Perhaps later.”

Just as Janice reached the door, her hand poised on the sloping handle, Sybil called out to her.

“Nothing’s come for me, has it Janice?”

“No flowers, Sybil, no.”

“She’s cruel you know – ”

“Come on now, don’t distress yourself. Why don’t we see what’s on the telly? What is it now... two o’clock? ‘Loose Women’ has finished but you like ‘Doctors’ don’t you?”

Television was Janice’s preferred choice of anaesthetic for her clients.

By the time she’d closed the door, Sybil was sitting in the easy chair, a rug over her knees, the remote control perched on the armrest. Emma’s Australian stories would be on soon. *No matter where you are, you’re my guiding star*. She could see her now, sitting on the sofa at home with her Findus Crispy Pancakes. *Neighbours* first, then *Home and Away* and a nice fat slice of Viennetta. Watching Emma’s programmes made Sybil feel closer to her somehow. One day, when they met again – for she was certain they would – at least they would have something to talk about.

A drama was unfolding on the screen before her; a doctor paying a house call, a woman collapsed behind her own front door. Sybil stared at the flashing colours on the screen until her eyes lost focus.

#

On this very day, twenty years ago, Sybil had received a knock on the door. At first she’d ignored it. She’d been in the bath for one thing and for another, her right foot had been

incapacitated at the time, Maddox Graham's mouth clamped around her big toe like an anemone. He'd made her squeal with that mouth. There'd been the David Mellor / Antonia de Sancha scandal a year or so before and now everyone was into toe sucking. It simply had to be tried! Clive had always teased Sybil that she had the feet of a peasant. When she'd mentioned this to Maddox he'd bitten her instep and told her that he had barbarous tastes.

The visitor had gone for the bell next, a long, painful trill. Prising her toe from Maddox's lips, Sybil had risen out of the bath, feeling like Venus herself. The dressing gown was new, a gift from Maddox, from New York. He'd had her initials embroidered onto the pocket. How strange she thought, to buy one's lover a gift, and have it embroidered with the surname of another man.

She galloped down the stairs, leaving a trail of dark footprints on the carpet. The moment she opened the door, an angry gust of autumn air rushed inside. A dollop of bubbles slid from her shin, landing on the hall rug like meringue. The bell presser had given up and gone. Standing in his place – for it was later confirmed that Wendy Paton's boy had made the delivery – was a small rattan basket with a tall loop handle, the type that a bridesmaid might tote down the aisle. It was neatly packed with orange gerberas, fire lilies, yellow roses and lisianthus. Too small to be from Maddox. Too thoughtful to be from Clive. As Sybil scooped up the basket, the wind slammed the front door closed.

“Maddox?”

She heard his heavy footsteps above her, the sound of bathwater gargling away. Seized by curious delight, she tugged at the small envelope stapled to the cellophane. Her own name and address were written there in biro, an unfamiliar hand – later confirmed to be that of the florist, Wendy Paton. Inside, a standard white card, blank as

a winter's sky. Sybil often wondered what had become of that card. Had it been taken into evidence? Destroyed, perhaps by Clive? She would like to have kept it.

#

Laughter jangled down the corridor. Janice enjoyed a joke with the residents.

“Come on Ken, we’ll have you dancing yet!”

Ken slept in the room next to Sybil's. She heard him shambling down the corridor with his walker, huffing as he passed her door. Any moment, Janice would poke her head around and ask if Sybil was coming for a ‘good old-fashioned sing along.’

Sybil feigned sleep and rolled the pad of her fingertip over the seed pearls sewn onto her cardigan. It was a cream cashmere cardigan that did not belong to her but to which she had taken a shine ever since it had been wrongly delivered to her chest of drawers several days ago. She counted seven seed pearls. Seven tiny planets orbiting a brilliant sequin. Eleven similar galaxies clustered across her shoulders. She'd counted them. Eleven planets times seven stars is seventy-seven. Seven years more than her current age. Seven more years to endure. Wasn't it written in the stars?

When she opened her eyes, the television had been turned off and the light was drawing dim. The blinds cast dark bars across the back wall. It must be teatime soon. A little thrill shot through her from chin to shin; there'd been no sign of flowers.

There were footsteps in the hallway. The door crashed open and in swung Hillary, wearing a nightie and clutching a doll.

“Did I leave my good slippers in here, duck?”

Before Sybil could respond, Hillary was scrabbling under the bed like a kitten.

“Things go missing in this place...”

Sybil didn't deign to respond. Instead, she pressed her buzzer. The light came on but there was no sign of Janice. Hillary was ferreting under the dresser by now, yanking out wedges of private correspondence from between the skirting board and the walnut sideboard. Heat spread prickly fingers around Sybil's throat. She'd grown up with that sideboard – a relic from Aunty Glad and Uncle Sid – still perfectly serviceable, rather charming really, whatever Clive said. Since Janice refused to post any more of Sybil's letters to Emma, she'd taken to posting her letters there; a place where only Emma would know to look.

Sybil pressed the buzzer again and again until, finally, Janice appeared.

"This is the third time that woman has been in here! Either buy her a new pair of slippers or lock the nutcase up!"

"We have no nutcases in here Sybil."

"The barmy army."

Janice ushered Hillary away.

When she was alone once more, Sybil sat on the carpet by the sideboard, her letters strewn about her like flotsam. She dragged them into her arms and sobbed. Tears came easily these days, as indulgent and cleansing as a good soak in the bath. From the sleeve of her cardigan she drew out a handkerchief and pressed it to her face. Janice did not approve of handkerchiefs.

"Use a tissue, Sybil," she'd say when she found another crusty bundle in the laundry basket, "It's so much more hygienic."

Sybil blew her nose noisily and blotted the tears that had gathered under her chin. She screwed up her sorrow like a fist and stuffed the handkerchief back into her sleeve. No sense in becoming maudlin. Onwards and upwards: wrapping her fingertips over the thick lip of the dresser, she hauled herself up into a standing position. She

lingered there a moment, stooped over the dresser, her laboured breaths disturbing Nanny Yarden's lace doily. The longer she stared at it, the more the dainty lace picots seemed to dance before her eyes. She nudged the doily aside and ran her finger over the ghostly stain of water.

#

She'd wanted to catch Maddox before he got dressed, while he was still warm and wet and bubbly. With no thought for a dish or a coaster or a doily, she'd placed the flowers on the walnut sideboard and leapt up the stairs two at a time. She found Maddox in the bedroom, brazenly drying himself on a towel belonging to Clive. He was as naked as a hairy man can be. Thick black curls crawled across his chest, his back, over his buttocks. Sybil was at once repelled and enthralled. She'd only ever known Clive, the narrow spine he turned towards her each night, pale and speckled as a hen's egg.

Maddox turned at the sound of her footsteps.

"It wasn't...?"

"Clive? No."

"Thank God for that! I thought I was about to be challenged to a duel or something!"

"I can't imagine Clive fighting for anything... least of all me."

"I'd fight for you baby," he said, sliding a finger into the belt of her bathrobe and pulling her towards him. The robe fell open and he ploughed his hands inside, grabbing fistfuls of wobbly flesh, making Sybil shriek with laughter.

"So who was it?" he said, sweeping her onto the bed, "Your other lover?"

He bit her earlobe when she didn't reply.

"It was no one!" she giggled, and he bit her harder.

“Really! It was no one!”

They spent the remainder of the afternoon between Sybil’s best Egyptian cotton sheets, (thread count: 600), undoing all the good of the bath.

It was a policewoman who first noticed the flowers on the sideboard.

“Would you mind if we go through to the other room?’ she said, “Only I’m allergic to lilies.”

As Sybil led PC Blakey through to the lounge, she saw the question form in Clive’s mind: *Where did they come from?*

She felt her heart flutter against her ribcage and before Clive had spoken the words out loud, she answered,

“Oh yes, the flowers. I was in the bath.”

Perhaps it was the strident note in Sybil’s voice that caught PC Blakey’s attention. She raised her long nose as if she had caught the scent of a lie. Sybil had no choice but to bluster on.

“The strangest thing... they were addressed to me but the card was blank...”

Clive was instantly impatient.

“Well who are they from?”

“That’s the point. I don’t know.”

“Well you must have some idea. One of your ladies from the Golf Club? Church?”

“It’s not important, Clive. Right now, we need to focus on Emma.”

Later, as PC Blakey was about to leave, she asked to see the card that came with the flowers.

“The card? Of course. It’s still –”

It was then that Sybil noticed the basket was leaking. In the yellow glow of the hallway, water collected at its base like urine.

“Clive, would you get a cloth?”

Blakey plucked the florist’s card from its envelope and inspected the logo.

“Cornucopia.”

“Yes. Lovely little shop on the high street...”

Sybil’s voice trailed off. Blakey’s eyes levelled with her own. She spoke in a low tone.

“We could talk in private about the flowers...”

“I don’t know what you’re implying,” Sybil replied.

Clive returned with a hand towel and began to mop up the water.

“Don’t use that,” said Sybil, “Why didn’t you get the cloth from the kitchen, like I said?”

“Stop fussing woman – it’s just a bloody towel.”

“I’ll take this, if I may?” said PC Blakey, holding up the florist’s card as if it were a courtroom exhibit.

“Of course, if you think it might help... although I fail to see how?”

“We need to follow all possible lines of enquiry.”

“Of course.”

“You have my card. If there are any developments, or if she comes home, please call me directly. In the meantime, I promise you, we’re doing everything we can.”

Clive shook the officer’s hand.

“Thank you, PC Blakey,” he said, then, as an after thought. “Don’t work too hard now!”

It was this, strange parting sentence that would be held against him in the months that followed. Sybil cringed even as her husband spoke the words. He was always so very terrible with words.

#

Sybil felt a little better once she was sitting back in her chair with her blanket over her knees. She smoothed out its rumples and composed herself, tapping her thumbs against each fingertip: Peter Pointer, Finger Tall, Ruby Ring, Baby Small. Back and forth, ten times over until she felt right as rain.

She reached for the remote control. Emma wouldn't be on the television until six but she might catch the end of Pastor Derek. If not, then she'd just have to make do with one of the others. There was a different pastor on every channel from 580 to 590. Most of them were American and while she relished their message, she did question whether the word of God ought not to be delivered with a greater reverence for basic grammar: *Acceptance be the path to righteousness. Don't be puttin' a question mark where God done put a period.*

Pastor Derek, however, was different – he was English. He had a kind smile and a pithy turn of phrase and his accent, though Northern, was not offensively so. She'd never heard of his ministry before but she was reassured to learn that she could join its ranks without ever leaving her armchair. He told her every day, "It's my great honour to come into your home and worship with you."

His chivalry made her blush.

From Pastor Derek, she'd learned that rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. From Pastor Derek she'd learned that God is in control and He does *not* make mistakes. From Pastor Derek she'd learned that there is a purpose in our pain, that you can

choose to be bitter, or choose to be better. You can choose to *go* through it or *grow* through it. You can be a whiner, or you can be a warrior.

Sybil's favourite part of his programme was its glorious crescendo, at which point Pastor Derek would be joined on stage by a chap on a keyboard and a lady with an African drum and they'd sing out various epithets:

"Lift up your heads and lift up your eyes, for the glory of God shall be revealed!"

"The Lord is with us and among us!"

"Ho! Raise your hands and give God praise!"

"Zappappa! Whoo!"

Sometimes Pastor Derek whooped himself hoarse and while he was taking a sip of water, his wife would step into the breach, her face a glaze of ecstasy:

"The work of the Lord is Shabbbabba satororo! Hilaba jojodona Allelulia!"

It really was quite a show. Jolly stirring stuff.

"Pray the pain away," Pastor Derek had told her.

Sybil prayed so often that she began to think of her prayers as one, long, open-ended conversation with God. At first she'd asked Him why He had taken her children from her. This was a mistake. It was not her place to question His methods. In the fulness of time, she would bear witness to the slow unsheathing of His great plan. Pastor Derek assured her that if she submitted to His truth, wonderful things would begin to happen. Pastor Derek was right.

There were small signs at first: a white feather on her pillow, a favourite song on the wireless, a Peach Melba yoghurt instead of the usual Autumn Fruits. Then, one balmy August afternoon last year, through the power of television, the Lord Almighty saw fit to reward Sybil's obedience. He woke her from her slumbers with the booming voice of a sofa salesman: "Yours for just two nine nine and zero percent interest!"

Fishing out the remote control from where it had worked its way down between the cushion and the chair wing, Sybil jabbed indiscriminately at the buttons in an attempt to dim the sound.

God would not be silenced.

He had a message that only Sybil could hear. Channel after channel jumped across the screen – snatches of words, music, images, none of it made sense to her until finally, miraculously, it did. God was the force in her fingertips that day; the day she summoned Channel 134 on her television set and came face to face with an angel. She was dressed in magisterial robes of gold and purple and sitting on a throne of light. An archangel hovered above her, speaking the language of heaven as he placed a silver crown upon her head. The angel looked directly at Sybil and smiled.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.

The face Sybil saw was Emma's.

Yr Hafan Farm, South Wales, 1995.

They were after that sett again. Idris had no love of badgers but he'd not stand for trespassers, trampling across his land with their dogs and their vicious instruments. There were lambs in that top field he'd marked for auction. Pulling on his jacket, he squinted out at the rain. Nothing doing. Just a distant, foggy lamp light. Nel's tail thumped on the hearth behind him; she lifted her head, awaiting instructions.

"Stay there, bach."

He'd one boot on and the door half open when Siôn came clumping down the stairs in his waterproofs, toting the shotgun.

"Cool head, boy."

"We've got to show them, Dad – "

"A gun shows them nothing, unless you're prepared to use it."

"I am prepared – "

"Put it away," said Idris, shoving his foot into his boot. He took the flashlight from its nail in the porch and strode out to the courtyard. Streaks of mud on his jacket vanished like chalk dust in the rain.

"Fine," said Siôn, ramming on his boots, "but I'm bringing this," and he took up the shovel from the wood-stack, slinging it over his shoulder as he followed his father out into the dusk. Idris didn't reply; he was already strides ahead, his flashlight probing the field. There were lights in the distance, guttering between the black streaks of birches at the edge of the farm. His ears strained against the pelting rain; indistinct voices, shouting, but no barks. A low rumbling – a distant growl of thunder or perhaps, a vehicle engine.

There was a hairpin bend at the edge of the farm, where the road wound back up the mountain to Penrhiw. A devil in the rain. Even a local would have a job easing out of that corner in this torrent. Drawing closer, he could make out a white Ford Escort, planted like an alien space craft in the blackberry bush. Lucky – a few feet to the left and it would have plunged off the edge, been gulped into the boggy crater at the bottom of the discarded quarry.

A movement in the stream of the headlights. For a moment Idris froze, unable to make sense of the scene. There was a wet smacking sound, perhaps a wheel, turning over in the mud. A dark figure hunched over what was it – a lamb? A ewe? And though he knew he ought to run to help, something inside him had seized up, he found his pace slowing, his body gripped by a murky sense of unease. He paused to wipe the rain from his eyes.

A man knelt in the mud, his back to Idris. He appeared to be pushing down on something. The movement was so vigorous and rhythmic that for a moment Idris thought he must be performing CPR. Not a lamb then, but a child.

Something was off.

The child was moving, trapped beneath him, arms pinioned by his thighs, one thin leg flailing in the mud. The rhythmic smack Idris could hear through the rain was not the sound of a tyre spinning in the ditch, it was the sound of her head, smashing into the earth.

Something lurched inside him, a cold clutch in his bowels. A sound gargled up from the pit of him, a stark, animal cry. He charged towards the man, catching him from behind and hauling him down to the ground in a clumsy embrace. The man was bigger than Idris, lean and muscled, but Idris was focused. At fifty, he was still as strong and supple as a wire. He wrestled the man onto his stomach, immobilised his arms; he'd had

worse spats with rams at tugging season. Siôn wasn't far behind. With his arm pressed down on the man's back, Idris yelled out to his son:

“Run back to the house! Call the police! Call an ambulance!”

But Siôn didn't seem to hear him through the pummelling rain. He'd gone to help the girl. He must have picked up the flashlight from where Idris had dropped it for when Idris looked up, he could see the child clearly, bathed in a pool of light, pale hair matted with blood and mud. Siôn knelt at her side, his face close to her ear, his lips moving.

...

She was breathing. At least she was breathing, Siôn was almost certain she was breathing. His own breath seemed to swell in his chest, bowing out his breastbone like a sail, the hammering of his heart like a battle drum. He heard his dad call out but he couldn't make sense of the words, couldn't grasp what was happening. One moment, the man was pinned beneath Idris and the next, it was Idris who was on his back, arms pinned under the knees of the stranger. It was all so fast. Siôn tried to run towards his father but his feet were block heavy, his legs rigid with panic. Idris reared up as if he would head-butt the man but the man brought his forearm down on Idris' throat. Idris's eyes bulged white in the gloaming.

All Siôn had was the shovel. It sang out with a dull metal clunk and like a push puppet, the man's body seemed to collapse in segments as he slumped to the ground. Dropping the shovel, Siôn sank to his knees, shouting his father's name, grasping his shoulders, dragging him up from the mud.

Gasping and rubbing at his throat, Idris lifted his palm in a gesture that said he was all right. He pulled Siôn into his arms and held him tight against his chest. The rain fell relentlessly, cold as daggers, loud as silence.

Clinging to his father, Siôn's eyes fixed on the beam of the flashlight. Discarded in the grass, it threw a sparkling column of light up through the dark. Raindrops dazzled like star bursts in its shaft. Siôn's gaze trickled down its length, to the ground where the stranger lay in a buckled heap. A snake of dark liquid emerged from the man's ear, slid down the side of his face and disappeared into the mud.

#

Hawys was in her study, seated at her desk, the window open a notch, a tentative invitation to the coming night. She could hear the stream chuntering down the back of the cottage, the distant whoop of a long-eared owl, crepuscular sounds that swam inside her room like music, a hymn to loneliness. Some nights she'd drag a cardigan over her shoulders and make the twelve-minute pilgrimage through the paddock to Yr Hafan for a hot chocolate, cwtshed up in front of the telly with the family she had claimed for her own. They had grown up on neighbouring farms, she and Gwen; more like sisters than best friends. Since her blood relatives were flung far and wide, Hawys treated Gwen's husband, Idris, as a brother, and Gwen's son, Siôn, a nephew. He was the spit of his mother and that gave Hawys some small comfort, for Gwen had been dead now, eight long years. Hawys's daughter, Alys, lived with her father, somewhere in England. These were bitter facts that Hawys struggled to accept. But if she couldn't have Alys and Gwen – the two people most precious to her – she could at least share their absence with those who loved them. They were a strange trio, Siôn, Idris and Hawys, the ragtag remnants of a family, but a family nonetheless.

No. Hawys wouldn't go to Yr Hafan tonight. It had begun to spit rain and anyway, she was on a deadline. The fresh bite of dusk helped to keep her thoughts focussed. She was fixated on a line of text, vexed by the impurity of the gloss, her mind poring over lost possibilities. Of course, it was an inevitable part of any translation: loss. A future scholar could raise the same complaint against Hawys – that she'd favoured one word over another and made a fork in the road. The innocent reader might never know the path unchosen, the choice that Hawys had made on his behalf.

She listened to her own voice, reading the original line out loud again. She compared it to her own version. The words made her heart sing; what more could she offer?

A sound outside woke Hawys from her thoughts, a low rumbling that she took at first for a tractor. Idris wouldn't be out at this time of day. The screech of metal and rubber, thwacking branches, hissing leaves. She wrenched up the window and leant out into the night. A white car had come off the B road and was hurtling down the hillside, headed for Idris's top field. He must have heard it also, for lights in the farmhouse were flashing on upstairs and outside in the porch. Tugging down the window, Hawys discarded her work and lumbered downstairs. Her boots were drying out by the stove; the rain over the last few days had been relentless.

Tugging up the hood of her waterproof coat, Hawys adjusted her head torch and stepped outside. The rain had thickened; it fell from the eaves in chains, making a deafening racket on the tin roof. Wincing at the pain in her right hip, she trudged towards Yr Hafan, moving as quickly as her body would allow. Rain made the pain worse; it seemed to glow and recede like the intermittent beam of a lighthouse.

She'd traversed the paddock when she saw car headlamps in the distance, two dirty streams of light, dissolving into darkness. She stumbled over tussocky grass,

almost lost her footing in the mud but did not stop until she reached the car. The passenger door was open and as she scanned around with her head torch, she saw that the surrounding earth was churned up. There was no sign of casualties, no one in the car, nobody on the ground.

She looked over towards the farmhouse and saw two figures, silhouetted against the porch light: Idris, doubled over and limping. At his side, straight-backed, shoulders braced, was Siôn. He appeared to be carrying something in his arms and as he neared the light, Hawys saw the bounce of a white trainer, a thin leg, limp as a trampled reed.

Her chest tightened with the tentative kindling of hope. Picking up her step, she began to move at a trot, stamping through the pain, her lungs burning with the effort. She called out their names – "Siôn! Idris!" – but her voice was weak, drenched in rain and they were already inside the farmhouse.

By the time she reached Yr Hafan, the door was closed. She reached out her arm and steadied herself on the porch rail, her breath in her fist, her eyes screwed up against the pain. When she could bear to open them, stars pulsed before her pupils. She took a breath, pressed her palm against the glass of the living room window and stared inside. Siôn had her in his arms, a girl of about fourteen, the same age as Alys. He was laying her carefully down upon the sofa. The girl's clothing was ripped and muddy: a thin black dress, torn open at the waist, wholly ineffective against the weather. As Siôn manoeuvred the girl's slender limbs into a more comfortable position, Hawys caught a glimpse of delicate ribs, a plum-coloured bruise and a strawberry mark.

#

Idris held the telephone receiver in his hand but his wrist was trembling, his fingers numb and clumsy. A bang on the door and the receiver slipped from his grip, bounced down to the ground on its plastic coil, smashing on the kitchen tiles.

"Yffarn!" *Hell.*

He went to the window, panicked by the now frantic banging. It was Hawys, eyes wide and yellow as a ewe's, fists beating up a din on the wooden panels of the door. He turned the key to release the lock and Hawys swept in on a gust of wind.

"I saw the crash – have you called an ambulance?"

"That's what I was trying to do when you started thundering on the front door..."

He walked back to the kitchen, cursing her intrusion. He attempted to clamp the receiver back together with his hands but it was no good.

"...damn thing's busted now... I'll have to go up Penrhiw..."

Nel had sidled into the kitchen. Idris heard her claws on the tiles and looked up. Silence. An unnatural quiet had settled over the house. It drew him towards the living room. Siôn was standing with his back to the fireplace, his hands to his mouth, palms pressed together, as if in prayer. He caught Idris' eye and shook his head in disbelief. On the sofa, Hawys was cradling the girl's head in her lap, her hands frantically smoothing the matted hair, muttering into her bloodied ear:

"Ti adre, ti'n saff nawr, fi yma, fi yma." *You're home, you're safe now, I'm here. I'm here.*

Idris spoke carefully.

"Hawys?"

She seemed not to hear him.

"Hawys, what are you doing?"

She looked up, her eyes bright and challenging.

"I said she'd come back."

"Hawys... It's been a long time..."

"Are you going to tell me I don't know my own daughter?"

He pulled up his hood and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Phone's broken. I've got to go up Penrhiw. Ask to use theirs."

"She's fine. She'll be fine. It's just a few cuts and bruises. I can take care of her."

"Hawys..."

He stared at his hand, clasping the door handle.

"She needs help."

"Idris. Please. She came all this way. If you involve the authorities, you know what will happen..."

"It's not just her, Hawys. There was a man with her. He's still up in the field. He needs medical attention."

Her face clouded over.

"There was no man."

"There was a man, Hawys. How do you think I got this?"

He pointed to the bruise that had begun to spread around his throat.

"I was just there, by the car. I'm telling you there was no man."

"Yffach. We have to call the police," he said, and picking up Hawys' discarded head torch, he opened the door and stepped back out into the night. The quadbikes were up on bricks; he'd have to walk but he could do it in fifteen minutes. He hadn't got as far as the paddock when he heard Siôn calling his name.

"What you doing lad? You need to stay and look after the women."

"And let you face that maniac again? It's okay, I gave Aunty Hawys the shotgun."

Idris stood in the hammering rain, stranded by indecision. He glanced back towards the farmhouse.

"Iawn te. *All right.* Come on."

The rain slackened off as they rounded the top of the paddock and made for the road that wound up the hillside to the neighbouring farm. They walked in silence for a while. Siôn listened to the slosh and clomp of their feet in the mud.

"Do you think it's really Alys?" he said.

It was several moments before Idris looked up from his thoughts.

"I don't know."

"The man... it wasn't Uncle Roger was it?"

"No."

"At least he isn't dead – at least I didn't –"

"You did what needed to be done. Now let's not hear any more about it."

Hawys's cottage was a beacon on the brow of the hill. She'd left a light on in the living room and it cast a bright wedge up the wall of the hallway, a busy pattern of summer blossom. Idris remembered putting that wallpaper up, Siôn wrapped in blankets and sleeping in the wicker chair, Hawys bent into the shape of a gibbous moon, the baby a week overdue. Where had Roger been? Away on business perhaps; he was often away on business.

Hawys had put on an old Tebot Piws album and she and Gwen were arm in arm, looping around the living room, singing:

"Mawredd mawr, 'steddwch i lawr, mae rhywun wedi dwyn fy nhrwyn!"

Gwen had found the dregs of the Christmas booze and was knocking back Sherry as if it were pop.

"I'm fine! I'm not drunk at all," she'd said, tripping over the wire for the tape deck and sloshing sherry down her blouse. She had the best laugh, Gwen – low and rattling, rising up to a yelp.

"I'll do this on my own then shall I?" said Idris, brushing gloom over the wall and though she didn't stop singing, Gwen hurried over with the next strip of paper, sliding it into place, swaying her hips.

Mawredd mawr. He hadn't heard that song in years. He would give anything to go back to that time, before everything went awry, before he, Idris, ruined it all. It was his fault Gwen was dead. It was his fault Roger took Alys away. Gulping back the tug of nausea in his throat, he told himself, *what's done is done, no point dwelling on the past.* It made no difference to the heaviness he felt in his chest. He'd bear the burden of his guilt for the rest of his life; it was his penance.

"Dad? Are you all right?"

Siôn had his hand under Idris's elbow.

"You're shaking."

Idris seemed not to hear him. He was far away in his mind, his face wet and contorted with tears. Siôn had only seen his father cry once before: the 16th October 1987; the day Siôn's mother died.

He and Alys had been playing in the debris of the hurricane, picking out loot from the hedgerows – they'd found a bicycle tyre, a sun lounger and a broken tennis racquet but their best find was a drowned badger that had washed up on the bank of the stream outside Alys's house. They were preparing to conduct a dissection.

"It's so fat!" said Alys, "Perhaps there are babies in there. We can rescue them and feed them like *swci* lambs. We can set up a badger sanctuary!"

Siôn was pretty sure it was only water in there. He was wondering if the badger would pop like a balloon and cover them both in guts. It was then that Alys looked up and said,

"Beth sy'n bod gyda dy dad?" *What's wrong with your dad?*

Idris was buckled over in the long grass, kneeling as if in supplication. His shirt was soaked with rain or sweat or stream water and Siôn could see the knobbls of his spine, shaking through the fabric.

"Sai'n gwybod," he said. *I don't know.*

#

The rain had dissipated and the sky was hazed with mist. Siôn didn't know what to do with his father's tears so he turned his shoulder to the gloom and pushed on up the hill until they reached the road. The moon slid through grubby rags of rainclouds, gilding the sludge silver, bouncing off the buckled girder at the roadside, illuminating scars of blackened rubber on the tarmac.

Siôn craned his head to get a look at Penrhiw. The road made a dogleg up the hillside, and from this angle he could just make out a light inside the farmhouse, the blue-grey fuzz of a television screen. Someone was up; if not Bleddyn, then one of the lads. He wondered what his father would say to them – how much of the truth he would tell.

They carried on walking up the road. The scent of cattle dung thickened the air, marking the Penrhiw boundary as fiercely as its hawthorn hedge. They hadn't quite reached the courtyard when a light came on. There'd been a spate of thefts in the last year, and Bleddyn had installed security cameras. Siôn was about to step into the glare

of those electronic eyes when something stopped him. Idris clamped his hand down on his son's shoulder and instinctively, they both ducked down.

A gunshot rang out, loud enough to shake the sparrows from the eaves, sending them scattering into the darkness like debris. A man's voice – Bleddyn perhaps, or one of his sons – shouting in the yard, furious, unintelligible.

Pressed against the thornbushes, out of the beam of the security light, Sion and Idris waited, fox and cub, for danger to appear. It came with the manic drill of a quadbike, a bolt of metallic red, streaking across the courtyard. It was moving too fast for Siôn to make out a face, but he recognised the red checks of the rider's shirt – it was the man from the car crash. As he sped off down the hillside, there were shouts from the farmhouse, boots pounding across the concrete yard. A man stepped into the light, slab-faced, toting a shotgun – Owain, Bleddyn's eldest son. Looping the gun over his shoulder, he ran, cursing towards the shed where the quadbikes were kept, his brother, Rhodri chasing after him. Mounted on the bikes, the brothers chased after the thief, the pneumatic hammer of their motors boring through the night.

Siôn pressed his father's arm and whispered into the darkness,

"What do we do?"

Idris thought for a moment, plucked a hawthorn spine from the sleeve of his jacket and straightened up.

"Carry on as we were," he said.

Stepping into the blaze of artificial light, he clumped on up to the farmhouse, and found Bleddyn standing in the doorway, a cordless telephone in his hand. It looked like a toy in his great paw. The farmer turned his boulder-shaped head towards them and nodded.

"Idris. What you doing here '*achan*? Bastard get to your place too?"

Idris hesitated, unable to meet Bleddyn's pale, watery eyes.

"Not exactly."

He explained about the car crash, but he failed to mention the fight. He explained about the broken phone, but he failed to mention the girl. Bleddyn sniffed, wiped the sweat from his craggy forehead.

"Some druggy. Joyriding, thieving. He'll not get far with my boys on his tail."

The hornet-whine of the quadbikes droned in the distance and for a few moments, nobody spoke. Siôn stared at the telephone in Bleddyn's hand.

"So... are you going to call the police or what?" he said.

Bleddyn fixed him with a rheumy eye.

"Aye, boy. In a minute now."

"Right," said Idris, "We'll leave you to it," and he turned back towards the road.

Bleddyn nodded but his eyes remained fixed on a point in the distance, where the milky darkness hummed with shadows.

Siôn and Idris walked back the way they had come, chasing the sloping road down to their own top field and on into the paddock. Siôn shuddered at the cold, his limbs fizzing with adrenaline. He focused on the sound of his breath, tugging on the damp air, the mineral taste of rain on his tongue. Cresting the hill, he could make out a pale shape in the distance. The roof of the crashed car curved in the moonlight like the bleached cockleshells that washed up on the beach at Llansteffan.

"Why didn't you say what happened?" he said.

Idris kept up a steady pace, sighed a breath before answering.

"Why didn't you?"

Siôn shrugged, unable to find an answer.

When they reached the crash site, the shell of the car was lit up from the inside. Somebody with a flash torch was rooting around inside. The hunched outline of a back bobbed against the door arch of the front passenger seat. Siôn's muscles tautened for a fight but his father placed a palm on his chest.

"Aros di." Hold up.

Hearing Idris' voice, the hunched figure backed out of the car and reared up towards them, proffering a pair of plastic yellow hands. It was Hawys. She held a cloth in one gloved hand and a flashlamp in the other. A bucket of soapy water slobbered at her feet.

"What are you doing?" said Siôn.

"Taking precautions," she said. She wiped down the passenger seat one last time before straightening up with a sniff.

Idris grasped the handle of the zinc bucket and together, the three of them trudged back home through the mud.

Siôn sacrificed his bed for the girl. He couldn't quite bring himself to call her Alys. He watched her sleeping soundly under the padded angles of granny Iona's quilt. If it really was Alys, she'd remember that quilt. She'd remember the thick, feathered weight of it, its greasy scent. The real Alys liked to press the silky hem against her nose.

Laying beside her on the single bed, Hawys bent herself around the girl, her body cramped into a sickle of protection. She smoothed the child's matted forehead, murmuring into her ear, crooning lullabies, rhythmic poems like prayers, as if, with nothing but the soft twine of her voice, she might spin a cradle of words for her baby.

#

5am. Idris slept fitfully on the couch in the lounge, dreaming of his dead wife, Gwen. She was pleased with his heroics, pleased that Alys was home. In the hedgerow behind Yr Hafan, a dunnoek was singing her morning trills. Gwen's lips were smiling, forgiving and when she opened them to speak, her voice was the song of the dunnoek.

An urgent rap on the window knocked Idris from his dream. He reared up from the sofa, half-drunk with fatigue as the rap became a bang on the door.

"Idris?" he heard through the wood beams, "It's me, Bleddyn."

Not the police then. Not yet. He unfastened the catch on the front door and let the dawn swarm in.

"Dere mewn," said Idris, but his neighbour shook his head. He wasn't stopping. Hanging one hand on the stone lintel above the door, he leaned inside, his broad back blocking out the light. He spoke in a low rumble.

"Here's what we're telling the police, all right? About an hour ago, some poor bastard crashes through your top field, smashes through the fence and ends up in the crater at the bottom of the old quarry. Your phone's busted so you come up to me and I call the police straight away. Right?"

Idris considered this story for a moment, weighing it against the truth. The car had crashed in Idris's top field, true, but much more than an hour ago; it must be getting on for six hours ago by now. When Idris last saw the car, it was lodged in the blackberry bushes. For Bleddyn's story to make sense, he and his boys must have dragged the car out of the thicket, pushed it up to the ridge and tipped it over the edge.

Idris swallowed hard, wondering about the driver, the man who attacked him.

"So he's dead then?"

"Crash like that?" said Bleddyn, "He didn't stand a chance, did he?"

And without waiting for a reply, he stepped out of the doorframe.

“Right then. When the police come, that’s what you tell ‘em.”

Idris nodded and Bleddyn backed away into the yard.

“Bleddyn? We’ve been neighbours a long time... always helped each other out. That’s not going to change. What really happened?”

Bleddyn cast his gaze up the hill, his hand trembling at his mouth. He swallowed hard before stepping back towards Idris.

“Late last night, my boys heard something out in the yard. You know the trouble we’ve had with thieves this last year? Well, Owain gets the shotgun and goes out to see what’s what. Right enough, some thieving bastard has managed to get hold of one of the quadbikes. So the boys go after him on their quads, manage to chase him up the field towards Bryn Moel, thinking they’d cut him off there. No one in his right mind would take a quadbike up that incline. Anyway. The fool didn’t stop. The quad toppled back, fell on top of him. Nothing anyone could have done. Rhodri felt for a pulse but...”

Bleddyn shook his big blocky head.

“An accident then,” said Idris.

“Aye,” said Bleddyn, sniffing. “An accident. By the time the boys got back and told me all this, you’d been up to say about the car crash in your field.”

“You were going to call the police.”

Bleddyn sniffed, stared Idris in the eye.

“There’s more to this than a car crash. When I got a look at the bastard, he looked like he’d taken a hiding – more than those bramble bushes would have given him.”

Idris hid his raw knuckles as Bleddyn went on.

“My boys swear they didn’t lay a hand on him – didn’t get the chance. Police might not see it that way though and that’s not a risk I can take; Owain’s still on probation after that scrap in The Bull last year. Rhodri’s getting married next month;

he'll be taking over Cefn Isaf. I can't manage this place on my own. If I lose Owain, I could lose Penrhiw."

Idris nodded as Bleddyn went on.

"I went up to the crash site. A few yards south and I reckon he would have missed the brambles altogether, would have gone right through your fence and over the edge. He might have done. He might as well have."

"You put him back in the car."

Bleddyn nodded.

"Pushed it over the ridge.

Again, Bleddyn nodded.

What about tyre tracks?"

"It's a bog out there. Nothing to see. Nothing that tells a different story anyway."

Idris nodded, scratched his day-old stubble.

"Well. There we are then," he said.

Relief softened Bleddyn's features.

"You're a good man," he said, swallowing the creak in his voice. "I'll have the boys fix your fence soon as the police have been."

He turned and slowly strode off up the hill, a bulky silhouette, fading to grey in the dawn mist.

Idris closed the door, ran a rough hand over his face. He ought to shave. No – it might appear odd, as if he were preparing for a police interview. He needed to appear natural, calm. He'd see to the livestock, just like any other morning.

Dressed and booted, he stepped into the morning to find the sun had broken through the mist. Steam rose from the field like a curse lifting, and Idris felt a lightness within him. The dream of Gwen had fortified him. *Everything happens for a reason, she*

used to say. Idris's faith had been waning and yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that Gwen was near him, that somehow, she was pulling on unseen strings. He could not undo the past but he had a chance now to put things right, to stand by his people, to place his faith in them. He heard again the piccolo peeps of the dunnoek in the hedgerow and felt that at last the storm was over, at last he might be forgiven.

Earlsdon Place Nursing Home, Surrey, 2015.

The door handle rattled as if an unsteady hand were testing its owner's mettle. It was that blasted lunatic again, Sybil was certain. Anger flushed her face, swift and fierce.

"Clear off!" she bellowed in the general direction of the door.

The rattle subsided. Poised for battle, Sybil eyed the door handle from the edge of her recliner. She would give that screwball a piece of her mind; she was almost looking forward to it. So when the door opened to reveal Kate, huge and blooming in the doorway, it took a moment for Sybil to rearrange her face.

"Kate!" she said, in a voice like a crow, "what a lovely surprise!"

They exchanged the usual pecked kisses and pleasantries after which Sybil insisted the door was closed firmly against intruders. Kate obliged; she was a good girl, Kate. A pity she was so broad in the hip; she'd run to fat in middle age, make no mistake.

"Lovely cardi, Sybil. Is it new?"

She looked absurdly large as she bundled into the toile settee and began disrobing herself. Such a profusion of woollen garments!

"This? No. Came in a Christmas cracker one year."

"Well it suits you," Kate said, unwinding the voluminous length of fabric in which she'd swaddled the baby next to her body. What a palaver. Sybil had only ever used a pushchair with Emma and Daniel. But then Kate's mother was one of those earthy types. She'd probably been giving Kate all sorts of terrible advice.

"There. Phew!" she said, planting the baby between a cushion and the back of the settee.

"How have you been, Sybil?"

She said this without turning her head from the precariously placed child. Her hands hovered before him as if to say: 'stay.'

Sybil pondered the question. How in fact *was* she? She'd been crying that morning. She knew she'd had words with someone but she couldn't quite recall whom. She had the sense that something momentous had occurred but *what?* Every time her mind groped for the memory, it dissolved.

"Well of course, they're keeping me drugged."

"Oh, Sybil."

"It's true! I don't know if I'm coming or going!"

Baby chose this moment to lurch forward, his head perilously close to the gilt arm of the settee. Kate scooped him up, planting a raspberry in the peachy folds of his neck. Sybil felt a sharp stab of nostalgia. It hadn't all been Napisan and sterilizing teats. There'd been moments like these, too.

"May I?" she said.

Kate stared at Sybil's outstretched hands, the long arthritic fingers swollen and buckled like root ginger. She had to force the words from her mouth:

"Of course."

But there was pleasure to be had from bestowing a kindness; she watched delight dance across Sybil's face.

"Hello baby Jade."

"Jade's all grown up now, remember? This is Bobby."

"Bobby?"

"Bobby."

Sometimes Kate could swear Sybil was putting the whole thing on, snickering into her sleeve as everyone fell for her nutty old lady turn. She was dandling the baby on her knee, clucking and cooing while his large sombre eyes fixed on her nose.

“Would you like a chocolate, Kate? My sideboard is an Aladdin’s Cave of confectionery.”

“I’d better not. I’m trying to lose the baby weight.”

“Wise girl. Keep your man’s eyes at home,” said Sybil, clutching the baby in an awkward embrace.

“Jade starts Uni at the end of the month.”

“Well, well.”

“She wants to be a physiotherapist.”

“Oh. Clever. Like her father.”

It was the same conversation they had every week.

“Such a bright young boy. Such a waste. Why on earth would he do something like that?”

Kate parroted through her script.

“We’ll never know for sure but I suppose the pressure of fatherhood was just too much for him. We were both so young after all...”

“Well it’s a crying shame,” said Sybil.

“It is. But it was a long time ago. I’m married to Lawrence, now.”

“Indeed. Works at the council doesn’t he?”

“That’s right – town planning. He’s working on the renovations for Roedale Park. Somewhere for little Bobby here to play.”

She chucked the baby under his chin, where Sybil’s thumb was awkwardly supporting his head.

“Lucky girl. Not all chaps would be so understanding.”

Kate blinked slowly, refused to take the bait. Lawrence’s words rang in her ears: *Why do you bother with the old witch?* Kate was no longer sure. Pity? Compassion? Or perhaps it was something more selfish than that.

Sybil’s eyes kept straying towards the dresser.

“Would *you* like something from the cupboard, Sybil?”

“Well perhaps a little something with my cup of tea.”

“Let me just get a cushion for your arm... he’s a great lummoX of a baby.”

“What I really fancy is a square or two of Turkish Delight.”

“Okay...”

“In the sideboard, poppet.”

She was only three strides from the baby but Kate’s arms felt horribly loose and light, her shoulders tight with unease. Had she been like this with Jade? Perhaps Lawrence was right; perhaps it wasn’t natural. That morning, he’d joked that the doctors hadn’t properly severed the umbilical cord. She’d accused him of jealousy. The thing had escalated and he’d left for work without a kiss. She’d pick up a sticky toffee pudding on the way home – his favourite.

Inside the cupboard were three hexagonal boxes of Turkish Delight neatly stacked on top of one another and a small wall of Battenberg.

“Gosh, you do have a lot in here.”

“I like to keep a good stock in case I forget a birthday. ‘Course it’s mostly funerals these days. There’s another one in the paper this week. Jim Timson. Lovely chap. He and his son Terry used to run the sweet shop in town.”

The baby let out a howl; Kate rose so quickly that she knocked her head on the lip of the sideboard.

“Oh dear. He wants Mummy,” said Sybil.

“What happened?”

“Nothing much. A little bump perhaps.”

Kate’s chest seemed to contract around her heart. Placing the Turkish Delight on the arm of Sybil’s chair, she lifted Bobby out of Sybil’s arms, cupping his skull in her palm, her eyes scanning for signs of injury.

“Tut-tut! You’ll make a Mummy’s boy of him.”

Bobby continued to wail.

“I’ll have to give him the boob. Do you mind?”

Before Sybil had a chance to consider minding, Kate had settled herself back down and pulled out a large brown nipple from the folds of her blouse. Peace was restored.

“That’s better,” she said, stroking the soft down of Bobby’s head.

Sybil’s mouth was a puckered seam. A tremor in her neck gave her the appearance of perpetual disagreement.

“You’ve dropped your muslin,” she said, poking the thing with the toe of her slipper.

“I’ll get it in a moment.”

With a considerable show of effort, Sybil heaved herself out of the easy chair, straining her fingertips to retrieve the muslin. She draped the square of fabric over Kate’s shoulder, concealing Bobby’s head and the offending nipple before collapsing back into her chair with a huff.

“Thank you,” said Kate.

“Quite all right,” Sybil replied, through gasps of breath. Then, after a moment or two, “I don’t suppose you remember Jim Timson?”

“I remember...”

“The son died in a road accident. Tragic. Wonderful chap too – he saved Emma’s life once. Did you know that?”

It was an oddity, since Emma was the cobweb connection between Kate and Sybil, that her name was rarely spoken out loud. Her absence hung in the air between them like perfume, as if Emma had only just left the room and might return at any moment.

“She fell into Roedale Pond. Couldn’t have been more than eleven or so. He dived in after her, pulled her out. Lord knows what might have happened if he hadn’t been there.”

Kate couldn’t manage a reply; a cloying nausea had thickened her tongue. Sybil went on.

“Of course! You must remember the son. He ran the drama club didn’t he? He and that glamour-puss mother of his. Now what was her name? Actress... she was in that thing with the antique dealer on the boat.”

“Ros.”

“Rosalind!”

Kate remembered Ros well, though she would never have dared call her by her Christian name. To members of Roedale Drama Club, she was always ‘Mrs T’, a dazzling woman with hair the colour of Frazzles. She wore her fringe fanned across her forehead like the wing of a bird; it bounced with a chemical waft as she led the class warm up, darting around the hall in short swift steps on the balls of her feet. Kate had begged Clementine to buy a black, bat-winged jumper just like Mrs T’s but she never did. Clementine’s wardrobe consisted of comfortable homemade shift dresses in embarrassing ethnic prints. Kate had thought how wonderful it would be to have a mother like Mrs T; she didn’t look old enough to have a grown-up son.

He turned up one Thursday to help Mrs T carry a sound system into the hall, ready for the autumn production of 'Godspell'. Kate was only eleven but she couldn't take her eyes off him. His skin was brown from a summer performing on cruise ships. As he hefted a speaker onto the stage, Kate caught a glimpse of the smooth lean muscles beneath his t-shirt and felt a bolt of something thrilling and shameful. Mrs T had introduced him to the class then: "I want you all to meet my talented son, Terry. He will be directing next year's production so you'd better be nice to him if you want a good part."

#

"Well anyway," said Sybil. "I shan't be going to the funeral. They don't let me out of this place. I'm a prisoner. I suppose I'll be next anyway."

"Sybil, that's no way to talk," said Kate. "Now tell me, have you heard from Daniel recently?"

"Oh, you know how it is."

"Still out in San Francisco?"

"Mmm."

"Still with Craig?"

"I believe they're still friends, yes."

The baby guzzled in the silence. Sybil twisted her wedding ring round her finger.

"Noisy little thing, isn't he?" she said, with a grimacing smile. "Will you be staying long dear? Only my programme's on in a minute... or perhaps you'd like to watch it with me? You know Emma has her own show now?"

"Emma?"

Sybil smiled brightly at her.

“She has the gift of tongues you know,” said Sybil. “Lord knows where she got it. Not from my side of the family, I can assure you. Although I must say I’d be surprised if it came from Clive. He always says there’s only two languages in the world: English and foreign. Go on then, be a dear. It’s number 134.”

Dutifully, Kate punched the numbers into the remote control. The screen blinked blue, then a man appeared. He was leaning on a gatepost, one leg bent and welly booted, the other firmly planted in mud. Behind him, a field the colour of lime arched up the hillside. He might have been presenting Countryfile, but for the unfathomable words coming out of his mouth; a series of strangulated sounds that made Kate think of Dutch.

“This can’t be right Sybil...”

“We’re a couple of minutes early is all.”

The man gabbed on in his funny language and Kate pretended to watch. She really ought to tell Sybil about the appeal – it would do her good to have something real to hold on to.

“It’s best that you don’t,” Janice had said.

Kate resented the presumption. Who was Janice to tell her what she should and shouldn’t do?

“Best for whom?” she’d replied.

Janice had folded her arms then, her neat little head set in a self-righteous wobble.

“It’ll only upset her. She’ll be on the phone to Mr Granger again, stirring up trouble.”

“She has a right to know.”

“With all due respect, Mrs McKinley, you visit Sybil once a week. If you go opening up old wounds, it’s the staff here that’ll be left to deal with the fall out.”

The baby flinched in Kate's arms. A garish theme tune blared from the TV as the programme credits spooled by. With some patting and shushing, Bobby settled down but Sybil seemed agitated. She kept shifting about in her armchair, twirling her rings, her eyes stuck to the television screen though it was only the adverts.

"Are you okay Sybil?"

"Of course she's let herself go where the waistline's concerned," Sybil replied, "and she's gone and dyed her hair red of all colours... but I tell you, she did look splendid that first time. They put a glorious cloak on her – purple and gold! And blow me if they didn't set a jolly great crown on her head!"

A new theme tune trilled out of the television and Sybil fell silent. Smiling faces slid across the screen, nodding and laughing as the words, 'Celf Cymru' flew into frame.

"Self Sime-roo? What on earth is this, Sybil?"

"Shh now poppet, it's starting."

The camera moved in slow and low on a woman, standing in the middle of an art gallery. She was plump but elegant, her bobbed hair shiny as a garnet. An olive scarf draped over one shoulder gave her a stately air. Kate tilted her head to one side and screwed up her eyes.

"I suppose there *is* something about the shape of her mouth..."

Sybil pounced upon this concession.

"You see!"

Kate continued to look.

"I was always telling her to stand up straight," said Sybil, "but she's got a terrible stoop, just like Aunty Glad."

If she had a stoop, Kate couldn't see it. The woman on screen stood square and firm, staring directly into the camera. Kate wondered what on earth she was saying. She could only make out a series of sounds. They didn't sound like words at all.

"Shall I see if I can get the subtitles up?" she said.

Sybil's heart soared. God's plan was revealed to her and it was magnificent! Now, at last, Sybil understood why young Kate kept turning up unannounced. The girl was part of His great plan – He had chosen her as His cipher!

So exhilarated was Sybil by this new revelation that when the door burst open, she was not prepared for it. Hillary was inside before she could muster a shout; an agent of darkness, come to stick a pitchfork in God's plans. Sybil could not let that happen. The buzzer was nowhere to be seen and the madwoman was making a beeline for Kate and the baby.

"There she is! I knew I'd put her in safe hands," Hillary warbled, "Thanks duck for keeping an eye on her. I'll have her back now."

Kate smiled up at her quizzically, clueless to the impending peril. Everything depended upon Sybil; there was nothing for it. She reached for her good navy handbag with the brass clasp. It was heavy with cough sweets and coppers. The shiny leather met Hillary's cheek with the satisfying ring of a smacked bottom.

#

With her key in the lock of her front door, Kate paused and considered turning back; she'd forgotten the sticky toffee pudding. She'd walked straight past the supermarket on the way home. Sybil's petty dramas were always so distracting. Janice was calling it assault.

"I'm not being funny but there *will* be consequences," she'd said.

Apparently, Sybil was already on her second warning. Kate felt an unreasonable tug of responsibility. She ought to inform someone but whom? Sybil's ex-husband, Clive? Her estranged son? Her missing daughter? Apart from the staff of Earlsdon Park, Kate was the only steady person in Sybil's life.

It was only a ten-minute walk back to the supermarket but there was supper to start and she'd promised Jade she'd help her sort through her stuff for Uni. Turning the key in the lock, Kate pushed on through the door. Lawrence wasn't one to hold grudges anyway; he'd probably forgotten all about their morning tiff. As Kate entered the hallway, Jade came bounding down the stairs towards her, large eyed and whippet thin, her fine hair wafting about her head like a cirrus cloud. She raised her nose at Kate in accusation.

"You've been ages!"

Kate put a finger to her lips. The twenty-minute walk from the nursing home had lulled Bobby off to sleep. Jade loped towards the kitchen as her mother began the laborious process of unswaddling the baby. She'd not yet unraveled the first knot when the banging started, great thwacks of a hammer that made the hall light quiver in its socket. Bobby stirred against her chest. If she shouted up the stairs, she'd wake him for certain. If she walked upstairs, he'd be woken by the banging. Kate hissed after Jade but got no response. She followed her into the kitchen and found her cramped over her iPad at the kitchen table.

"Go and tell Lawrence to stop banging will you?"

"What did your last servant die of?"

"Insolence."

Reluctantly, Jade slid out from the kitchen table, leaving the iPad amongst the jumble of unopened post.

“I’m sick of being ordered about.”

“Somebody call Esther Rantzen.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

Moments later, Kate heard Jade’s light feet on the stairs, leaping four steps at a time; she didn’t get her height from Kate. The creak of floorboards, muffled voices, then silence. Kate was about to unravel the baby when she noticed Jade’s Facebook profile, still open on the iPad. A sneaky peek couldn’t harm, surely? She glanced over the page. There were pictures of the sixth form leavers’ ball, children she’d known since babyhood, dressed up to look like adults: Will and Holly, Olivia, Lucy and Josh. She’d miss their little gang, turning up for movie nights, sleepovers in the den, the ongoing drama of who was snogging whom. There was a pang of envy too; she’d never made it to university. She’d had to slog through night school to get her Journalism degree.

Her fingertip hovered over the *scroll down* button. Jade had ‘liked’ a page. A couple of clicks and Kate’s appeal video popped up on the screen. The Police must have shared it online. Turning the sound down, so as not to wake Bobby, Kate pressed *play*. She saw herself in miniature, head and shoulders framed in a bright box. Her face looked tired and drawn under the harsh police lights. She watched her mouth, silently reciting the lines she’d rehearsed. Her lips shaped the words even now.

“We have reason to believe that Emma planned to run away. She ordered a bunch of flowers to be delivered to her parents on the day of her disappearance. Around six thirty on the evening of the twentieth of September 1995 she was seen leaving Roedale Park where we believe she left a pile of clothes by the pond. From there, the trail goes cold. If anyone has any information about Emma’s whereabouts, please contact Surrey Police,

using the number on screen now. Emma, if you're out there, please get in touch. You don't have to come back... just let us know that you're safe."

She scrolled down the page, embarrassed by herself. Underneath the video, Jade's friends had commented:

- Why did she send the flowers? That is so FUCKED UP.
- She doesn't want to be found. That's why she sent the flowers. Obvs.
- Why is ur mum doing the appeal and not the parents?
- She's probably buried under their patio. LOL.
- Jade, your mum is well fit. Maybe U R adopted.
- ROFLAO

Kate looked out of the kitchen window, stung by the callousness of youth.

A sound like a gull squark rang out above Kate's head. She heard the indistinct rumble of Lawrence's voice, then the bellow of his laughter. Her curiosity piqued, she followed the sound upstairs, smiling as she reached the spare room.

"What's so funny?"

Kate stood in the doorway and stared at Lawrence's DIY efforts. The fireplace he'd taken it upon himself to unblock was a disaster. Grit, plaster and soot had spewed from its mouth, covering the rug he hadn't thought to remove and dusting he and Jade in a haze of grime.

"What the -"

"I know, I know! I should have called a professional..." he said, lumbering towards her, showering grit with each step. "Sorry."

Kate turned her cheek to him.

"You'll get muck over Bobby."

Jade let out a cackle of laughter; she'd not looked up since her mother's arrival. She was sitting on the floor, her back to the doorway.

"What's so funny?"

"You – aged fifteen!" said Jade, holding up a small, leather-bound diary. "It just fell out of the chimney breast... oh-my-God it's hilarious Mum. Listen to this: *My only love sprung from my only hate!* You thought you were Juliet!"

The flash of red in Jade's hands was as shocking as blood. Kate felt hot and sick and strangely weightless. The baby began to cry.

"Kate! What is it?" said Lawrence.

"It's private."

He could barely hear Kate's words over the screaming baby.

"What?"

"The diary."

"Jade, give your mother the diary, will you?"

Jade moved towards Kate in slow bewilderment.

"Here," she said, proffering the scarlet book. She'd left a grimy thumbprint on the brass clasp.

"Sorry. It was only a joke."

Later that night, when dinner had been made and eaten, when dishes had been tidied, when the builder had been called and arrangements been made, when Bobby had been bathed and soothed into sleep, when Jade had apologized for the third time and stalked off to bed, when Lawrence was showered and snoring, when Kate was alone in the dark, she held the diary between her palms until the leather began to sweat.

She must burn it. It was the only responsible thing to do. She slipped out of bed and into her dressing gown. Down the staircase she padded, all the way to the kitchen. She opened the black door of the wood-burning stove and hesitated. It had kept her alive, writing that diary. It was Dr Chundra's idea, of course, a therapeutic tool designed to break Kate's silence. If she couldn't speak the words, then perhaps she could write them down.

Kate ran her thumb across the fore edge of the diary. The pages exhaled a stale breath over her face. She watched her words jumping about. Drama club. Terry. Sweet shop. Towards the last quarter of the diary the pages slowed, the entries became sparse and obscure – snatches of poetry written in mirror writing, quotations. Kate found the page that Jade had read.

My only love sprung from my only hate.

There was no reason for Jade to see herself in the words. Next time, Kate might not be so lucky. She plucked a box of safety matches out of the spotty mug on the crockery shelf and placed the diary, spine down onto the ash of yesterday's fire. It was still faintly warm. She struck a match and carefully placed it at the edge of a single page. She had written his name there again and again – Terry Timson – as if she were writing lines in detention. At once, the thin paper lit up and she dropped the match into its fold. Using the poker to hold the diary open, she waited and watched until the flame began to struggle. She lit another match. Thick yellow flames now, blistering the red leather cover, blackening the brass clasp. She closed the stove door and laid the poker back on its brick.

She ought to return to bed. Instead, she picked up her phone. His name appeared in a list of recent searches: Terry Timson. With the smallest movement of her thumb, she summoned his digital ghost before her. His smile beamed through the darkness. Wholesome. Handsome. Monstrous.

Kate felt a storm brewing inside her. Taking the baby monitor down into the basement, she burrowed under a musty throw on the sofa. When she was sure that she was alone, that the door was closed, that she wouldn't be disturbing anyone, finally, quietly, she allowed herself to cry.

Earlsdon Place, Surrey, 2015.

Sybil had been keeping to her room since 'the incident' as Janice referred to it, and while Sybil was not being formally punished, neither was she encouraged to join the usual recreational activities laid on at Earlsdon Place. She heard calls for Whist in the lounge and watercolour painting in the conservatory but nobody knocked on her door to chivvy her along. Nobody admonished her laziness with a gentle insistence that she 'buck up' and 'join in the fun'. She took her meals in her room and kept herself to herself and day-by-day, her world shrivelled a little smaller. Before long, it fitted within the thirty-two square inches of her television set. But it wasn't defiance that kept Sybil to her quarters and it wasn't shame either. She'd barely given Hillary a second thought; Sybil was grieving.

Just as quickly as Emma had reappeared in Sybil's life, she had, once again, vanished; her transmission signal scrambled, her image erased. For four long days, Sybil had been tuned into channel 134, waiting for a glimpse of her angel but instead of 'Celf Cymru', there was some bobble-hatted buffoon in an allotment garden. All day, and much of the night, Sybil kept a vigil by the television set. Crabbed in her chair, wretched with worry, she prayed until her words became mere sounds, blunt and meaningless as the clacking of beads. It seemed that God too, had deserted her. In the silence of her solitude, Sybil closed her eyes and allowed her mind to take her home.

#

A burning smell assaulted Sybil's nostrils the moment she stepped through the front door. It was probably Daniel, smoking cigarettes up the chimney again. At least Emma

made an effort to hide her indiscretions by going down to the bottom of the garden.

Sybil called out from the landing,

"Daniel? Don't think I don't know what you're up to young man..."

But when she reached the living room, it was Clive she found, bent down at the hearth, hands trembling as he burned a stack of paper over the grate.

"Hello," Sybil said, an air of expectancy in the word that she hoped would bring forth an explanation. Clive was not in a communicative mood; he got up from his knees and stalked from the room, barking over his shoulder:

"What's for dinner?"

And as she followed him out to the kitchen, to deal with the lamb chops she'd picked up from the butcher, her eye caught a sheaf of notepaper, crisping in the grate. A golden flame licked the ruled lines, devoured the curling ink of hand-written words.

Clive stood by the hostess trolley in the kitchen and lifted the lid on an orange casserole dish – something awful with chickpeas that Clementine had brought round despite Sybil's protestations that she couldn't eat a thing.

"Daniel still needs feeding," she'd said and Sybil had not appreciated the note of accusation in her voice.

"You can put that muck in the bin..." said Clive, grimacing at the smell, "...paupers' food."

He prowled the length of the kitchen, found an open bottle of Merlot on the sideboard and poured himself a glass.

"What have you been burning?" Sybil asked.

"Nothing for you to worry about."

"It looked like Emma's handwriting."

"It's nothing."

“Perhaps the police – ”

“Are you deaf woman? I said it’s nothing! And I don't want to see that Barton woman round here again, you hear me? Interfering bitch. You can bet your life she's been telling lies to the press. Over-educated, over-opinionated –”

Sybil was about to chime in 'overweight' but it was better not to interrupt him while he was on a roll.

"You're not to talk to her. Do you hear me Sybil? And if she comes round here, sticking her nose in our private business, you can tell her from me, she'll have a lawsuit on her hands."

Three shrill notes rang from the doorbell. Sybil rushed towards the sound, hope bubbling in her belly. Emsy. She pictured her little face, full of contrition, ready to put this whole silly business behind her. But when she opened the door, it was PC Blakey who was standing there, accompanied by a male police officer in plain clothes.

"Hello Mrs Granger, this is Detective Sharman. We've come to look in Emma's bedroom, see if we can find anything there that might help the investigation. Can we come in?"

Sybil was about to usher them inside when Clive came marching up the corridor.

"Actually now is not a good time," he said, "we're just about to have dinner."

Blakey's eyes narrowed.

"Dinner?" she said, slowly.

"Of course, I couldn't eat a thing," said Sybil, "but you know these men, got to keep up their strength..."

The detective spoke up.

"Mr Granger, I'm sorry if the timing is inconvenient but we're trying to find your daughter..."

"Of course," said Sybil, "come in, please do come in."

"No," said Clive, "I'm sorry. You'll have to come back in half an hour. And if you're planning on poking around my private property, you had better have a warrant."

Blakey began to protest but the senior officer spoke over her.

"You'd better come with us, Mr Granger."

Clive stood gaping indignantly at the officers.

"My little princess is out there somewhere, and you come after *me*? Useless bunch of imbeciles."

"I can arrest you here and now, for obstructing the investigation."

"I'm not obstructing anything!"

"Let us inside then."

"What's that lying bitch been saying?"

PC Blakey took a step back, brushed a bead of saliva from her jacket.

"Who?"

"That bloody Barton woman... it's her you ought to have in custody. She probably put Emma up to this little stunt. I wouldn't put it past her. She's framing me!"

In the end, they took Clive in his slippers. Sybil watched, speechless, from the porch as Clive clambered into the police car. He still had on his suit trousers and shirt though the latter was rather worse for wear, soiled by a dribble of wine.

Perhaps it was the shock; time seemed to slow. Sybil could see Clive's mouth moving but she could not make out his words. His shouts were volleys of arrows that failed to hit their mark. All Sybil could hear was the panicked pump of her own blood, ringing in her ears.

The slam of the car door brought her to her senses and while Blakey made her way round to the front passenger seat, Sybil noticed that one navy leather mule had been dislodged from its owner's foot. It lay forlorn on the curb like Cinderella's lost slipper. She rushed to her husband's assistance, stepping onto the tarmac in her stockinged feet to retrieve his slipper. The police car had already jerked into life but Sybil's knocking on the window stalled its advance. The rear window rolled down and she was able to pass Clive his slipper. He clasped her wrist tightly.

"Clean up the mess in the grate," he said.

His nails marked her wrist. Only as the police car began to move did Clive relinquish his grip. Sybil stood bewildered in the road, rubbing her wrist, watching the police car shrink down the hill. Clive's last spittle flecked words clung to her:

"Don't let me down now Sybil."

Kneeling at the hearth, Sybil found a stack of smouldering paper, a manuscript perhaps. She stretched out a tentative forefinger and poked the fragile remains. A charred corner disintegrated at her touch, peeling away to reveal a white heart of unburned paper, scored with spikes and whorls of blue ink. Even Emma's handwriting was melodramatic. Sybil's eyes lit upon her own name and she reached into the smoke to pull out a page. The words she read winded her.

His hand trembles on the buckle of his belt. The leather snakes out of its loops with a sibilant rush, coils around his fist, the knuckles pearl-white. A tongue of leather dangles down.

"Take off your trousers."

"No."

A twitch in the muscle of his jaw. His chin juts towards the flocked ceiling.

“Now.”

“No.”

The bedroom fills with the stillness of bated breath. I am a cat, one paw dipped in unfamiliar territory. I study his expression. His lips are stretched thin and grey like faded elastic. From this angle, I can see beneath his chin, a strip of stubble that escaped his razor. He cannot look at my face. He’s looking instead at my jeans, the cinched in waist, the immodest clinging.

He lunges. My knees spring up reflexively, catching the corner of his glasses, so that they slide up his nose and lodge at a ridiculous angle. I paddle my feet at him, not brave enough to land a kick and now it is too late, he has me pinned beneath his middle-aged spread. His breath on my neck is ragged with spit. I push my palm against the dome of his forehead.

“Get off! Get away!”

His skin beneath my fingers is the texture of ingrain wallpaper. I’m wrenching my hips this way and that, shoving back his head with the heels of my palms but his weight on my ribs is glacial. I am flattened. My forearm fits within the circle of his thumb and fingers; he removes it like an errant weed. With his elbow, he pins my other arm to the bed. The belt still looped around his fist, he raises a finger to straighten his spectacles.

Tears now. Fat and acidic, they score my cheeks as I submit to the inevitable. The sharp stumps of his nails in my tummy flesh as he yanks me round, chokes my sobs in the Liberty bedspread, drags my jeans down over my thighs. My knickers come only half way, the hot pink cotton rucked in the crack of my bum. Maybe he will leave them. He will not. He wrenches at the fabric till the elastic snaps.

“Please. Don’t...”

If I'm still, maybe it will be over quickly. A sound in his throat like a purr, the subtle creak of stretched leather and then its bite. It beats the breath from my chest. A lick of fire that smarts and sings again and again and again. I am marked.

I bite the wadded quilt, fists full of paisley, tears brimming fury. My vision is salt-fogged but I am not mistaken. There, in the slit of the door, framed like a celluloid ghost, is my mother's pale face, one glassy eye, blinking. The sloped handle dips and the door is closed.

The following morning, Sybil is bundling bedsheets into the washing machine when I walk into the kitchen.

"Morning Poppet. Got anything else for the wash?" she says.

"No."

I reach up to the cereal cupboard and pull out a box of Ready Brek. No mention of the damp sheets then, of the Liberty bedspread drenched in piss. I scuff around the kitchen in my Garfield slippers, cupboard to fridge to microwave, while my mother selects a hot wash.

"You'll have to get the bus this morning – Dad's had to go in early for a breakfast meeting."

Local radio burbles in the background; jingles that are as familiar to me as songs.

"So give us a call, on oh-one-six-six-oh..."

"What's that, you say?"

"Nothing."

I take a large scoop of sugar from the ceramic tub on the counter. Sybil gives me a disapproving look.

"Sit at the table to eat your breakfast, darling. We're not savages."

I look down into my bowl.

"I'm not sure I'm well enough for school today."

Sybil is placing teatowels in a drawer, each one an ironed rectangle of perfection.

"Come on now," she says, quietly, "Onwards and upwards. You're not pretty when you're surly."

I turn to face her and for an awful moment, I think I might be about to say something. Instead, I reach for another scoop of sugar.

"Do you really need that, darling?"

I ignore the question. With a tilt of my chin, I stare my mother down. She knows but she says nothing. Perhaps she does not care. Perhaps she thinks it is what I deserve.

Perhaps it is what I deserve.

"Don't you ever wish you could drive?" I say.

"Where did that come from?"

"All your friends at the Golf Club drive."

"Yes, well. Your father gave me lessons once... let's just say, I wasn't a natural."

I shovel down a mouthful of oats and turn to face the window.

"He wouldn't let you."

Sybil makes no comment. Her task complete, she closes the drawer with a flourish.

"Right. Well, I can't stand around here all day. I've got things to be getting on with," she says, striding across the kitchen to switch off the radio. "Your sandwiches are on the sideboard."

I stare out at the prim garden; a bullfinch swings on the feeder; a squirrel bounces across the lawn but I do not see them. I am looking at my own reflection. I am listening to the sound of my mother's mules on the freshly mopped floor; a fading trail of tight lipped kisses.

And in that moment, my mind reaches up to the top shelf of the bathroom cabinet, where Sybil keeps her sleeping pills. I decide. I will fill my belly with pills and my pockets with rocks. No more Lady Lazarus of the lake. This time I will last it out and not come back at all.

#

Sybil reached for the alarm button. Her chest felt tight and airless, she attempted to cry out but she could not make a sound. As her thumb held down the red button, her bladder failed her. She was grateful for once for the dreadful pads Janice made her wear. Then, just as suddenly as the memory had assaulted her, it began to slide from her mind, slipping like a fish back under the surface of her thoughts, sinking back into the past. And while Sybil knew that it would return, slick and sudden and predatory, she was relieved that for now at least, she was safe.

Yr Hafan Farm, South Wales, 1995.

Hawys was in the kitchen of Yr Hafan, unwrapping a brick of Bara Brith from its wax paper when Siôn came through the back door, brandishing *The Western Mail*.

“Front page,” he said.

He kicked off his boots and scudded over to the kitchen table while Hawys sliced the cake into slabs and spread a film of salty butter over each one.

“What’s it say then?” she said, setting the plate of cake down on the table.

“A thirty-four-year-old man has died after crashing his car into a disused quarry in Brynderyn. The man’s next of kin have been informed and police are now appealing for witnesses.”

He looked up at Hawys.

“What if someone comes forward?”

“Who?”

“I don’t know... someone who happened to be on the road...”

“There’s us... and the Penrhiw lads.”

Siôn picked up a slice of Bara Brith and took a creamy, crumbly bite.

“And Alys,” he said, swallowing.

Hawys lifted the teapot at the centre of the table. Its glossy brown spout poked out between the tight green pearls of Gwen’s tea cosy. *What would Gwen think?* Hawys wondered as she poured them each a mug of tea. Gwen had been a stickler for the truth. But Gwen was not here. For eight years, Hawys had borne the grief and guilt of her friend’s death, the punishment of her daughter’s absence and now, at last, she felt the tender shoots of hope. Stuff what Gwen would think.

“Nobody needs to know about Alys,” said Hawys.

Siôn stared at his plate, collecting cake crumbs on the pad of his forefinger. He said nothing.

Later that day, the police returned to Yr Hafan, though it was more of a social call than an official visit. It was Iwan Berllan – a man Hawys had known since he was a boy. His parents were members of the same chapel.

“All pretty straight forward,” he said, accepting the cup and saucer Hawys placed into his hand. “Coroner’s Report confirms the initial assessment: poor weather conditions; driver lost control. The council are going to put steel reinforcements on that bend up by Penrhiw.”

“What do you know about the driver?” said Hawys, running her thumb over a small chip in the rim of her cup.

“Holidaymaker. He was booked for the midnight ferry: Fishguard to Rosslare.”

“Bit late in the season,” said Hawys.

“The parents reckon he had a girlfriend over there.”

Hawys tilted the plate of Welsh cakes towards her guest, avoiding his eye as she said, “Girlfriend?”

“Oh go on then,” said Iwan, rescuing a cake from the small landslide. “Yeah, he told them he was going to surprise her.”

“An Irishman, then?”

“No. English,” said Iwan, taking a bite of Welsh cake.

Hawys raised her eyebrows over her teacup.

“So the English police are dealing with it now,” said Iwan. “Might be some press interest – could make the nationals actually. Seems this ‘Terry Timson’ was a bit of a local hero.”

“Wel y jiw jiw,” said Hawys. *Well, well.* She sniffed, pulled herself upright in her chair. “And how are your parents, Iwan? Keeping well I hope? I saw your Mam’s name down for the cake stall at the Plaid fundraiser. No one makes teisen lap like Glenys.”

The conversation turned to the details of their own world, the village and the chapel, the projects that wove their community together.

“Remember me to your parents,” said Hawys, as Iwan turned to leave.

“Will do. Look out for the papers.”

Hawys nodded but in truth, she didn’t trouble herself with the English newspapers. There was nothing ‘national’ about them. Still, she was glad that the whole sordid business would be taken off her soil. Let the English deal with their own problems.

Siôn had been listening from the stairwell. When he was sure that Iwan was gone, he stalked into the kitchen.

“The national press eh?” he said.

Hawys frowned.

“Thought I might head into the village. Do you want anything?”

“No thank you,” said Hawys, making her way past him and up the stairs, back to Alys’s bedside.

Siôn headed into town for his daily fix. When he could unhook himself from his duties on the farm, he’d often spend an hour or more in the local library, scrutinizing the broadsheets. He’d no intention of farming for the rest of his life. His sights were set on a career in politics. In six months’ time he’d be applying to read Politics at Aberystwyth, Cardiff, perhaps even LSE.

He scanned the papers daily for news of Alys or of Terry Timson but it was two weeks before anything appeared. A small column on page seven of *The Daily Mail* read, 'Local hero killed in Caernarfon crash.' Siôn shook his head. *Only about a hundred miles in the wrong direction.*

The national press was consumed with a different story: a missing fourteen-year-old from Oxfordshire. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Karen Banks was 'a sweet, fun-loving girl – an angel'. She'd modelled for the Littlewoods catalogue and now her wholesome smile was slathered all over the front pages. Siôn thought of the girl at home, lying in his bed: mousy hair, smudge-grey eyes. Definitely not Karen. But was she really Alys? She must be, for anyone else would have been reported missing. Her photograph would be in the papers right next to Karen Banks.

Siôn had no choice but to place his faith in the people he trusted most – Idris and Hawys. Still, the thought nagged at him, *where was Uncle Roger?* If he'd cared enough about Alys to run off with her all those years ago, then why was he content to let her go now? Questions multiplied inside him like cells. There was no one to ask – no one but the girl, Alys.

He thought about the last time he'd seen her, a week after the great storm, the day of his mother's funeral.

They buried Gwen on a Tuesday. Idris didn't cry so Siôn didn't either. The show of solidarity almost choked him. He spent the day nodding mutely, afraid to open his mouth for what might fly out and betray him.

The wake was bewildering. Hoards of strangers parading through Yr Hafan, picking like carrion at the cold meat on the dining table, cramming bread and butter into their mouths and speaking through the crumbs. Old women he'd seen in chapel but

never spoken to, peered into his face, inspecting him for signs of weakness, telling him he had to be a good strong boy for his daddy.

Where was Alys? Siôn wondered. He stuffed a stack of Aunty Ethel's Welsh cakes into his pocket and headed off to find her. The field was sodden, the mud glossy. His smartest trousers were wet to the knee by the time he got past the paddock and up to the pear tree where they'd carved their names with Alys's penknife. The air was heavy with the threat of more rain and the smell of wild garlic from the hedgerow. He clung to the trunk of the pear tree and listened out for his friend. From here, he had a good view of the cottage. The windows had been shut up but the door was flung open, its red paint blistered and peeling like burnt skin.

Uncle Roger's car was in the drive, a navy Ford Granada blasting out a tinny version of Dire Straits. Uncle Roger loved Dire Straits. He was always humming that song: *Money for nothing and your kicks for free*. He appeared from behind the front door, wearing a leather jacket and a pair of pointy boots that made Siôn think of Rumpelstiltskin. He held in his arms a stack of files which he shoved into the boot of his car before slamming down the hatch. Siôn wondered for a moment if perhaps he was taking Alys on holiday, as the car was full of boxes and bags. Then he noticed an armchair strapped to the roofrack. People didn't take armchairs on holiday with them.

Alys tramped out of the cottage, head down and drooping. Siôn called her name but his voice was shushed by the swollen stream. It was too late, anyway. Uncle Roger was already jostling her inside the car. Siôn ran towards them, heart thumping as he realised what was happening. The car crackled down the gravel drive, towards the road that led out of the village. Siôn ran after them for as long as he could, panting, yelling Alys's name. He saw the pale oval of her face in the rear window, her disembodied hand pressed against the glass.

Could that limp girl in his bed really be Alys? Hawys said there was a birthmark – and she ought to know – but Siôn couldn't remember it. He tried to conjure the seven-year-old Alys in his mind, flesh and freckles, lashes and lips. All he could see were the photographs Idris kept in an album in a drawer of the dresser. Bright and blurred, they merged with his memories so that he could no longer separate the two. His mother was in there too, her face elusive in his mind's eye, turned at an oblique angle. And yet her hands, he could picture as clearly as his own: strong, capable hands that could knead a loaf or tug out a stuck lamb. He saw the deep moons of her fingernails replicated in his own and thought it strange, the things we inherit from our parents and the things we don't.

#

When Siôn got back to the farm, Idris approached him with a peevish expression.

“Where've you been? I could have done with your help this morning.”

“Sorry. I was at the library. I had an essay to write... do you want me to top up the hay racks?”

“I've done it now.”

Idris turned his back and headed towards the shed. He'd found scald between the toes of one of his ewes. He'd have to set up a footbath.

“The new fence looks sturdy, up in the top field,” said Siôn.

“Aye. The Penrhiw lads did a good job.”

Siôn followed his father down the far end of the shed, where there was a work room containing a store cupboard in which he kept the wormer, the disinfectant, and the zinc sulphate for scald.

“I was thinking, you know, they’ve got themselves a side line up at Penrhiw – a little quadbike track. Maybe we could do something like that?”

Idris looked fiercely at him.

“No.”

“I was only thinking – ”

“If you want to make yourself useful, go and fill out an order form for Maisie’s. We need a couple more bags of concentrates.”

Siôn looked crestfallen as he backed out of the shed. Idris paid no mind to it. He would not be diversifying. Not now. Not ever. The very word put him in mind of Roger and that in turn put him in a temper. If he ever saw that man again, he felt certain he would kill him.

Roger. Gwen had disliked him from the moment he swaggered into their lives with his Barbour jacket and his shiny Hunters. She called him ‘Y Sais’ - *the Englishman*. Idris accused her of prejudice.

“The fact he’s English has nothing to do with it,” she said, “He’s sly and he’s a bully. You mark my words, he’ll leave Hawys in the lurch and I’ll be the one left to pick up the pieces.”

It took five years for the cracks to appear. Idris would come home for lunch to find Gwen and Hawys cosied around the teapot, their heads bent together confidingly, as Hawys unloaded the burden of her dying marriage onto the kitchen table for her friend to dissect. Idris caught snatches of conversation here and there, small details that he dismissed as the fault finding of picky women.

"I tell you Gwen he'd tell me black was white just to be contrary."

"If he lies about the small things, it makes you wonder what else he's lying about."

Idris liked having another man about the place, not that Roger was any help around the farm. He was always too busy scouting for deals, buying and selling farm equipment.

"Forever on the make," Gwen said, but Idris admired his gumption. So when Roger invited him down Y Dderwen for a pint of bitter and a game of darts, Idris agreed. They were on their second round before Roger got down to brass tacks.

"I'm not much cop at darts to be honest," he said, prodding a finger inside his bag of pork scratchings. "What I really wanted to talk to you about is a business proposition."

He plucked a greasy curl of pig fat out of the packet and held it up for Idris to admire. A twitch of his eyebrows said *take it* but Idris declined, turning his head with a long blink. He took a slug of bitter.

"Go on."

Roger turned down the corners of his mouth as if to say, 'suit yourself' and, snapping up the morsel, he proceeded to talk as he chewed.

"If we was to start hiring out equipment to all the farms round here, we'd be raking it in. Couple of ATVs, a muck spreader, maybe a power harrow. You could store the kit, look after the maintenance and wot not – leave the rest to me."

Idris took a pull of his bitter, thought about the small fortune he'd spent hiring a vacuum tanker last autumn. He wouldn't want to get involved with that side of things but a couple of ATVs, a Matbro perhaps, he could see those coming in handy.

"I'll think on it," he said.

"Don't take too long thinking, mate. Meat prices ain't what they was. You need to diversify."

A week later, he'd come to Idris as if it were all a done deal. He'd waited till Gwen was out on the school run before heading down to the barn in his best tweeds, a rollie pinched between forefinger and thumb, its glowing tip cradled in the bowl of his palm.

"Alright mate? Need a hand?" he said.

Idris was bent down at his tractor, grease gun in hand, groping under the front wheel axle for a hidden grease fitting.

"Roger. I didn't see you come in."

"I had to find you mate. See, I've found this peachy little deal over in Llanybri."

That would make Gwen's skin crawl, Idris thought, the way Roger put a 'C' before the Welsh letter 'Ll'. He slid the nozzle of the grease gun into the fitting and squeezed the trigger until a donut of black lithium oozed out.

"A Massey-Ferguson 275 going for a song. But we've got to act fast. All I need is a clean ten grand. You're good for it aren't you? Only my capital is all tied up in bonds..."

Idris stood up, pulled a rag from the worktop and ran it around the gun nozzle. Roger seemed agitated, eyes darting, cheeks hollowing as he sucked on his cigarette.

"Ten grand?" said Idris, "I know my way around a Matbro. Never touched a Massey-Ferguson."

"You won't need to mate. Straight off the production line. Mint condition."

"I don't know..."

"Mate. I've been dealing in machinery as long as you've known me. I'm telling you, this is the deal of the century."

Idris had the capital all right. It was sitting in a saver, slowly and steadily accruing interest at a rate that the farm depended upon.

"I'll need to talk to Gwen first," he said.

Roger pulled a face, gave an exaggerated gasp.

"Bloody hell mate. A man don't have to run every last little detail past his missus. Come on Idris. Grow a pair."

The jibe hit its mark. Idris knew that Gwen would refuse on principle. He felt a cold sweat of shame when he thought of his folly. He was spineless, pathetic, a push over. He'd given Roger the money.

It might have been all right. Gwen might never have found out. But then Hawys went and got herself arrested. She and her friends from Cymdeithas yr Iaith, *The Welsh Language Society*, had travelled up to Cardiff to protest outside the council offices. She'd begged Hawys to come too, but someone needed to pick up the children from school. Besides, Idris couldn't spare her on the farm. There was a storm coming. The weather reports insisted that it was nothing more than bluster but Idris trusted his instincts. He'd felt the driving rain of the last few days like daggers in his back; he'd watched the trees of the old copse swaying like saplings. He was penning the last of the livestock when Gwen came to tell him the news.

Her body moved in brittle flicks as she swung a leg over the fence post and hopped down into the yard. Idris latched the gate, wiping his sweating face on his sleeve as he strode towards her, squinting into the wind.

"Breach of the peace and damage to public property," said Gwen, "and it gets worse. Roger says he's not going to pay Hawys's bail."

"What?" said Idris, with a laugh. "You mean, he's going to let her sweat a bit? Teach her a lesson."

"No. I mean he's not going to pay her bail. We'll have to find the money."

"Woah now. How much are we talking?"

"Three thousand. We'll have to dip into the saver."

Idris felt hollow. This was not how he'd planned on telling Gwen about the money he'd given to Roger. He panicked.

"No. This is Hawys's mess – her own fault for getting arrested again. Protesting is one thing but she always has to overstep the mark. She was lucky to get off last time but you can't say they didn't warn her."

It was true; the judge had been lenient after Hawys's first offence. She had refused to pay her television license in protest against the lack of Welsh-language programming. For this, she spent a night in a jail cell in Bristol. Her second offence cost her three days there. She and her friends had stormed a local television studio, demanding a Welsh language channel. They made the six o'clock News. The third time Hawys was arrested – this time for defacing a telephone box – Alys was just a baby. The judge let Hawys off but sternly warned her that if she committed another offence, she could expect three to six months in jail – just like the men.

"She's no one to blame but herself," said Idris.

The look on Gwen's face made him flush with shame.

"What's happened to you Idris?"

"What's happened to me? I've grown up, Gwen, faced facts. You think they're ever going to give us an assembly? You're dreaming. You had your answer back in '79."

"We got our Welsh language channel didn't we?"

"Aye. We got S4C... isn't that enough?"

"You sound like him. Y sais." *The Englishman*.

He felt the sting of her disappointment as sharp as a slap.

Gwen said she'd drive up to Cardiff herself. Storm or no storm, she'd do what was right.

"Siôn and Alys will need picking up from school at three thirty. Do you think you can manage that?"

Idris didn't reply. He gave a curt nod, turned on his heel and got back to work. There was a fence that needed shoring up around the slurry pit. Besides, there was no stopping her. He didn't even try.

When the storm came, Idris was watching from the window of the back bedroom, Siôn and Alys saugaged in the quilt on his lap, trembling with excitement as they witnessed the wind take monstrous forms, snarling up telephone wires, buckling the branches of ancient trees, their trunks shrieking creaks into the din. All through Yr Hafan, the wind rattled along the rafters, cold eddies of air thrashing through the corridor like angry spirits, hissing into dusty corners, spitting out shadows. As Idris comforted the children, as he told them that they were safe, that no harm would come to them, his mind reached out to Gwen. She ought to have called by now. He thought of the curls that sprang up on her temples when it rained, the soft down of her cheek against his neck, their bodies folded together in sleep, her legs threaded between his own, the smooth sole of her foot against his shin. A soft moan rose up in his throat but failed to form words. Where was she?

He was plagued by the painful notion that the storm was his own creation. If only he had told her the truth, she would not have gone out in this weather, she'd have stayed here with him and the children; she'd have worked out a solution to the mess he had made of things. It was his pride that had driven her out into the storm, his pride and his shame. He would give anything to take it all back.

He woke with her name upon his lips. The blanket had slid from his shoulders and he was shivering in the armchair, spotted with gooseflesh. The children slept on, curled in a quilt at his feet as he rose, creaking from his chair and walked slowly towards the window. His fields were littered with foreign objects like the remnants of a decadent party. Several trees had fallen and streamers of wire fencing lay tangled on the grass. A washing line whirly-gig had cartwheeled into the paddock. If Gwen were here, he'd have shot over to the barn to check on the ewes. But Gwen was not there and he felt her absence like a physical ache in his chest. An emptiness descended upon him, a ringing in his ears like the reverberations of a struck bell. His eyes fixed on the bald horizon, the road that led to the outside world, the same road that brought the outside in. And even before he heard the blue light humming over the brow of the hill, he knew in the marrow of his bones, that Gwen was gone.

For four hours he called no one – told no one. He allowed the children to play in the stream at the back of Hawys's cottage while he checked on the livestock and made his way around the farm, measuring the damage, weighing up the costs. As he hammered back a fallen fence post, the words of the police officer dripped through the silt of his mind: *Trefach bridge, collapsed.*

Not Gwen, no.

He caught up with the kids outside the cottage. The stream had flooded with the storm and was foaming with all sorts of ghoulish prizes. A dead badger bobbed along on the current, bloated as a bagpipe, its eyes ripe and shiny. The children were jabbing it with a stick, their faces aglow with the morbid light of curiosity.

It was then that Idris saw Gwen in his mind's eye, screaming as the bridge crumbled, her car tumbling like a toy down into the river, her fingers grasping for a way out, her screams soundless liquid.

Roedale, Surrey 2015.

Kate woke in the den. The basement's tiny window was an open eye. At boot level with the garden, it looked out onto the vegetable patch. Kate could see her spring onions straining towards the dull, rainy sky. The cotton stripes of her pyjama top clung wetly to her skin; a dull ache pulsed out from her armpits.

“Shit. Bobby.”

The baby monitor had run out of charge; it lay dumb and discarded at the top of the stairs. Footsteps thumped along the hallway above. Scrambling up the stone steps to the kitchen, life returned to her at full pitch.

“Mum! Where the bloody hell have you been?”

“I was in the den.”

Jade's face was incredulous, the curl of her lip snarling each sentence into an interrogative.

“Lawrence has been really worried? Bobby's screaming his head off? How could you not have heard him?”

“I'm sorry. I lost track – ”

She heard creaks on the wooden staircase of the hallway, slippers feet bringing Bobby's screams ever closer. When Lawrence emerged in the hall, the look on his face was an assault. Was he angry or frightened? It was hard to tell. His mouth was a thin white line as he thrust the baby at Kate and then it was Bobby who filled her vision, a ball of puce fury, shaking his little fists. The rocking chair scooped them both up and with a nipple in his mouth, Bobby's horror was at once assuaged.

It was so easy now. To think of those first few days, those terrible first weeks. Failure to latch, excruciating pain, nipples cracked and bloody, the futility of it all. And

yet here he was, feeding now, as if it had always been this simple. It seemed so improbable, so miraculous, that with nothing but her own body, she could keep a human being alive. Of course, it couldn't last. In the blink of an eye, Bobby would be storming about and slamming doors, just like his big sister. But for now, he was hers and she willed it all to last just a little longer.

Lawrence handed her a mug of tea.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I must have fallen asleep."

"In the den?"

She nodded and the pain in her neck pulsed. Lawrence busied himself with the dishwasher, clanking out bowls and plates for breakfast.

Jade wafted about the kitchen, gathering up cables and phones and tablets and stuffing them into her bag like a spoilt child, hoarding sweets.

"I'm sick of people messing with my stuff."

She might be an adult in the eyes of the law but her mother knew differently.

"Well if you tidied things away..."

It was an invitation for a fight and Kate ought to have known better.

"Me? You've got to be kidding..."

She vaguely heard words coming out of Jade's mouth, but found herself concentrating instead on the fine down of her daughter's arms. Such frail, twiggy things, those arms. It was hard to imagine them rescuing anyone from peril. And yet she'd qualified with flying colours, spent her gap year working as a lifeguard at the local swimming pool. The birthmark on the inside of her right elbow was the exact shape of a baby badger. At four, Jade had named him Binker, after the AA Milne poem. How many times had Kate kissed Binker goodnight? And when, Kate wondered, was the last time?

“So have you sent it?”

“What?”

Jade was staring at her.

“The money for my halls of residence! You’re not listening to me at all, are you?”

“No, I am listening. I haven’t forgotten. It’s on my to-do list.”

Jade made a tooth-sucking squeak.

“Straight out of Compton are we, this morning?”

“Compton – Surrey,” said Lawrence, laughing through his nose.

Jade tugged on her Ugg boots and slouched towards the hall.

“I’m glad you two found each other ‘cause no one else is gonna laugh at your crap jokes.”

“Jadey, we’re only pulling your leg. Have you had breakfast?”

“I’m fine.”

“I didn’t ask you how you were, I asked if you’ve had breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Jade was already halfway down the hall and with Bobby firmly ensconced at Kate’s breast, she was going nowhere; she’d have to let it go.

“Have a good day,” she called out, to the slam of the front door.

Jade was right to remind her about the Halls of Residence – how could she keep forgetting? Dr Chundra would call it ‘subconscious avoidance’ or some such nonsense. Really, it wasn’t subconscious at all. A violent dread rose in Kate whenever she thought of her little girl venturing out into the world alone, to a city in which she’d spent only an afternoon. As if proximity to the sea and a giant Top Shop were good enough incentives to uproot her entire life. There was a perfectly good University not twenty miles away and Jade could have lived at home.

“I thought you’d be pleased?” Jade had said, “It’s the birthplace of your beloved Dylan Thomas.”

“Beloved? I don’t know where you got that idea from.”

“All those poetry volumes up in your study? Neat little notes in the margins. I totally cribbed those for A-level English.”

“I’d forgotten about those.”

Jade seemed so fixed on this tenuous thread between them, Kate didn’t have the heart to tell her that the books had belonged to Emma.

Lawrence pulled a stool up to Kate’s rocking chair and set down a plate of thick brown toast, dripping with butter.

“Too much?”

“Never.”

She wondered if he was still cross with her.

“What’ve you got on today?” she asked.

“Quiet one really. Progress meeting for the park.”

“On target for spring opening?”

“Hope so. It’s going to be fantastic for Bobby as he grows up. They’ve ripped out the old public toilets and there’s going to be a much larger play space... swings, zip wire, sand pit...”

His voice trailed off and he stared at her.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing. It’s just...”

His mouth moved hesitantly, failing to shape words.

“Look, I know what you’re thinking,” said Kate, “but I woke up in the night and couldn’t get back to sleep so I went down to the den for a bit. It’s not a big deal.”

“So you weren’t looking at online chat rooms again? You weren’t trawling the missing persons’ register, hunting for Emma?”

“No!”

Lawrence stared at her and she felt her face flushing.

“I wasn’t!”

Lawrence squatted down next to her chair, tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear.

“Maybe you should give Dr Chundra a call,” he said.

A nerve in her cheek jumped.

“Maybe you should go to work,” she said.

Lawrence sighed and got up. Kate watched him walk away down the tiled hallway towards the dresser where coats and shoes and keys were kept. Light burst in through a semi-circular window above the front door, a sunrise of lead and glass that stained the magnolia walls a vivid liquid red. Kate stroked the baby’s head, her tears flattening the fluff of his hair as she heard the cleft of the front door.

Kate wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her pajama top, took a lug of cool tea and listened to the empty house. Beyond the kitchen’s electric hum, she could hear the grind of traffic outside, clunking car doors, shrill children clattering to school on scooters. Her eyes scanned across the duck egg walls of her kitchen, the dust gathering on the picture rail, the framed picture of ‘my family’ that Jade had made, aged seven. There was Mummy with tiny feet and Nanna wearing earrings the same size as her head, a squished up Aunty Frankie and a pot bellied Uncle Oliver. Above them all, grinning down from the clouds were two angels, one labelled Grampy, the other one, Dad.

Kate thought of taking some flowers to their graves and as if her subconscious had laid a trap for her, she found herself revisiting that day in the graveyard, all those years ago.

Kate had often gone to the graveyard for some peace and quiet after school, a place she wouldn't be bothered by her noisy siblings and nosy mother. Sometimes the groundsman forgot to lock up the maintenance hut and she could settle down on one of the damaged pews inside, finishing off her homework under the glare of a naked bulb. It was an old haunt, somewhere she and Emma had played when they were younger and she wasn't entirely surprised to find Emma there, belly down on the concrete floor, writing. Her shoulders were hunched, her pen moved furiously over the page.

"You beat me to it," said Kate.

The sound of Kate's voice sent Emma scuttling into the shadows.

"Jesus Kate, you shouldn't creep up on people like that."

She was about to argue that she hadn't been creeping about but instead she said,

"Sorry. You okay?"

Emma was on her feet now, brushing herself off, clutching her ring binder to her chest.

"I'm fine."

"Revision?" Kate asked.

"No."

She hugged her folder tighter.

"A poem?"

Emma shook her head.

"You wouldn't get it."

Kate didn't take the bait. Instead she said, "Remember when we used to come up here and make spells?"

She twirled out of the doorway and into the graveyard, arms outstretched, an operatic vibrato in her voice:

"Rise up you dead and live again, death shall have no dominion!"

Emma stood in the doorway of the hut and gave her a sidelong smile.

"You do realise I nicked that from Dylan Thomas, right?"

"What? And I thought you were a proper witch..."

In a few minutes, it didn't matter that they hadn't spent time together for months, they were laughing just as they used to, sitting on a slab of black granite without a thought for what lay beneath.

Emma lit up a fag.

"We should have hung out together more often," she said.

"Mum's always asking about you," said Kate.

Emma looked down at the scorched tip of her cigarette as it failed to light. She sucked harder.

"I always liked Clementine," she said, "tell her I said 'Hi'."

Once she had succeeded in lighting up, she blew smoke from the corner of her mouth and offered Kate the packet.

"Nah, you're alright. I prefer menthols."

She turned her face up to the sky, remembering how they used to search the clouds for the faces of the dead. Today the sky was faceless, grey as salted snow.

"How's it going with Luke?" said Emma.

Kate had been going out with the Head Boy of their school for over a year. Two years her senior, he was square jawed and straight laced, tipped for Oxbridge.

Clementine thought he was a good influence; he'd persuaded her to join the school choir.

"It's going great," she said.

"You loved up?"

"Yeah."

"You *done it* yet?"

Kate threw back her head and let out a hoot.

"Cut to the chase why don't you!"

Emma stared at her side on, her cigarette trapped in a wry smile.

"Well... have you?"

"No."

Emma turned down the corners of her mouth.

"Does that surprise you?" said Kate.

"It's just, I dunno. We're fifteen. It's not a big deal."

"So you've *done it* I take it?"

Emma took a deep drag on her cigarette, her forehead furrowed in thought.

"Course. Loads of times."

Emma's words were casual but her body was tense, her shoulders hunched and defensive.

"You've got a boyfriend then?" said Kate.

Emma laughed at the word, a world-weary cackle that rattled into a cough.

Recovering her breath, she stubbed out her cigarette on the sole of her DM boot and turned to Kate with a mocking smile.

"I have a lover," she said, "As a matter of fact, we're going to run away together."

Kate couldn't tell if Emma was being sarcastic or not. Something had shifted in the air between them. She felt suddenly small and stupid. She got to her feet and brushed the gravel from her school tights.

"Aren't you going to ask me who it is?" said Emma.

Kate began stuffing her belongings back into her rucksack.

"Nope."

She ran the zip up and round her bag, then turned towards the gate.

"It's getting late, I should get home."

As she stepped onto the path, she heard a sound behind her, a sob perhaps.

Picking up pace, Kate headed for the main road.

Two routes home appeared before her: the long route through town or the shortcut through the woods. The woods looked appealing in the amber light of early autumn. Snatches of sunlight filtered through the yellowing leaves, casting a golden sheen over the footpath. She could follow that gleam all the way home if she chose. It was the way that Emma would choose, but Kate wasn't a girl who took chances. The light was already fading and soon that path would be slick with shadows. Kate chose the High Street. She sheltered under its brassy lamps and gaudy shop signs and was safely home before nightfall.

She only saw Emma once after that day in the graveyard. She'd taken Emma's 'memoir', as requested, and given it to Clementine, who had placed it absent-mindedly on the kitchen shelf with a mounting pile of post and promptly forgotten all about it. Clementine. The thought of her mother sent a ripple of anxiety through her stomach. She missed her more than she ought to.

#

“Get out of the house. Get some fresh air.”

Even as a stuttering picture on a computer screen, Clementine knew the right words to say to cheer Kate up. She was enjoying every minute of her VSO post. The girls she was teaching were eager and able, Nepalese food was delicious and the weather in Surkhet District was balmy but not sapping. She’d lost half a stone from walking everywhere and was thinking of staying on another six weeks. Was anything the matter? Had Kate been crying? Was there something she needed to talk about?

Terry Timson. His name fizzed on the tip of her tongue.

“No, of course not,” said Kate, “I’m fine.”

“You know, it’s important to get exercise when you’re feeling stressed.”

“I’m not feeling stressed.”

“Well, good. I’m afraid I’ve got to catch my lift back to Bijaura now. Give Bobby a kiss for me. And tell Jade to send me an e-mail when she gets to Swansea. I want to hear all about Fresher’s Week.”

“ ’Course. Love you. Bye.”

For a moment after their call disconnected, Kate stared at the frozen frame: her mother’s face, blurred in motion, lips pursed for a farewell kiss.

Twenty minutes later, Kate was heaving the buggy over the porch and out of the house, breathing steam into the fresh morning. Wheeling the pram along the garden path, she felt the familiar clunk of the paving stone that she’d not got round to fixing. If Mum were serious about staying on in Nepal, that would give Kate another six weeks to fix it. Otherwise Clementine would be out there herself, on hands and knees with a trowel and mortar and she wouldn’t wait to be asked, either. Lawrence would get riled up then and say something snarky like: *Your mother seems to forget that it’s our house now.* Her stomach clenched at the imagined confrontation.

Drake Street sloped down towards the town centre; a neat line of Edwardian villas that descended into Victorian semis, some of which had been converted into flats and sheltered accommodation. As a child, Kate had been inside one or two, accompanying Celementine as she delivered Meals on Wheels to the elderly. They'd whizzed around town in Clementine's clapped-out Ital, dodging the potholes and singing along to jingles on the local radio. You couldn't whizz anywhere these days; the road was a clogged artery of four-by-fours and people carriers.

Kate crossed the road onto Broad Street; rain gave the fresh tarmac an anthracite sheen. She made her way down the hill, angling the weight of her body against the pull of the pram, picking up speed as she passed St Martin's. The doors of the church hall were wide open. Discarded prams cluttered the vestibule and somewhere deep inside, a piano plinked out a tune: *If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands*. Kate sped on, bowing her head to avoid eye contact with any well-meaning church folk who might attempt to lure her inside for a cup of tea and a slice of Christ.

Five minutes later and Kate had reached Roedale High Street. It was mostly cafes and restaurants these days. The town clung nostalgically to its butcher and baker and where it lacked a candlestick maker, there was an abundance of boutiques selling scented candles and nick knacks for the Yummy Mummy who has everything. Kate had lived in Roedale her entire life and yet sometimes she wondered if this was where she belonged.

The sweetshop loomed towards her. She wouldn't speak his name. Wouldn't even think it. Terry Timson: respectable businessman and local hero; rescuer of drowning girls. He'd raised thousands for charity; selflessly gave up his spare time to run a drama club for local kids. There was a commemorative plaque outside the community hall. Kate ignored the cold swell of nausea in her stomach and sped up, the

wheels of the buggy squealing as she raced past the shop front, eyes down. He'd been dead now twenty years so what did it matter that the town still adored him?

All that remained of the sweetshop were the Victorian tiles at the entrance – the word 'Tobbaconist' in swirling stone. Kate's gaze was drawn to this emblem of her childhood. It brought to mind the scent of aniseed and strawberry laces, slush puppies that stained her tongue blue. In summer, there were long thin lollipops, stacked at the bottom of the freezer box. Had Terry watched them all those years, she wondered. Waiting for a glimpse of knickers as they reached down into the deep freeze? She imagined Emma falling in, Terry sliding the glass lid over her head, watching her skin marble, her lips fading from pink, to blue, to white.

"Kate! Hey, wait up!"

A woman was trundling towards her, pushing a Bugaboo and wearing a manic smile. Kate felt a slight sinking sensation in her chest as she recognised Mel Knight, all floral print and ballet pumps. She had that expensively tousled look Kate recognized from the school run; skin tight as an apple, eyebrows plucked into an expression of permanent surprise. It was too late to pretend she hadn't seen her; she'd have to stay now and be polite.

"Kate! I haven't seen you for ages! I hope you haven't given up on pilates? Do you fancy getting a coffee?"

Mel spoke so quickly that there was barely room to respond; webs of saliva clung to the corners of her mouth.

"Actually I've got to – " Kate began but before she knew it Mel had steered her into Starbucks, ushered her onto a leatherette sofa and penned her in with a parked buggy.

“I tell you, it’s like being a single parent,” said Mel, setting down two coffees and two pastries. “I sometimes think life was easier when I was managing multi-million-pound budgets.”

This was a new record; it usually took a good ten minutes before Mel mentioned the multi-million-pound budgets.

“I know you’d never guess to look at me, but I actually used to be someone kind of important: Head of New Business – until I went and married Jimbo – my very own Don Draper.”

Kate had met Mel’s husband; he didn’t belong in the same sentence as Don Draper.

“Oh-my-God, I saw you by the way – doing that appeal for your friend? So. Awful. Have you really never heard anything from her since?”

“Nothing.”

“The flowers though... weird.”

“Hmm.”

“I’m not being funny but... she’s probably dead, right?”

“Well... I still like to think there’s a chance –”

“I’m sorry, me and my big mouth! I didn’t mean –”

“It’s fine. You’re probably right.”

Kate took a slurp of coffee and reached for a topic that would steer the conversation out of this blind alley.

“So when are you going back to work?”

“I’m not. Jimbo earns so much more than me, he reckons it’s not worth me working, once we’ve paid for childcare and everything.”

“There’s no shame in missing your old life,” said Kate. “I love my job – I’m going back next month.”

Mel flushed a deep shade of shame.

“Well of course, it’s a massive privilege to be *able* to stay home with Mia. I know that’s not the case... for everyone.”

It was a relief to them both when Kate’s phone began vibrating on the formica table, a miniature earthquake that made a flea circus of the croissant crumbs. The number was not one Kate recognized and immediately she thought of Jade; perhaps her mobile had run out of juice, perhaps she’d had to borrow a friend’s phone. How was she ever going to cope on her own in Swansea?

“Sorry, I’d better answer that – it might be my daughter,” she said.

Mel’s head tilted to the side.

“I didn’t realize you’ve got a daughter.”

Of course she didn’t; when did Mel ever ask Kate about herself?

“Yes, she’s just turned nineteen... she’s been on a gap year but she’s about to go off to Uni.”

“Nineteen?”

She saw then the same sequence of expressions she’d seen countless times over the years: the momentary confusion, the quick mental calculations, the judgement.

“I should probably get off now anyway,” said Mel, gathering her belongings together, “It’s monkey music at St Martin’s.”

As Kate answered the call, she watched Mel reverse out of the coffee shop, swinging the pram round and mouthing ‘bye-bye’ as she headed off in the direction of the church.

It was Lawrence. His voice sounded hesitant, uneasy.

“Darling, I’m calling from the police station. I thought I should tell you, before you hear it from someone else...”

“What? What’s happened?”

“The construction team in the park... they’ve found a body.”

Yr Hafan Farm, South Wales, 1995.

The girl's eyes are swollen shut, the pain in her throat a barbed brace through which no word can escape. She drifts in a strange bed, in and out of sleep, the border between day and night, hazed. She cannot untangle dream from thought.

She feels her mother's presence.

Cool hands run a warm cloth over her skin, press water to her lips. She cannot swallow and yet she must. She must do this for her mother. She must.

Mother sings to her. Strange, doleful melodies, unfamiliar, the words unfathomable.

Cysga di fy mhlentyn tlws, cei gysgu tan y bore...

An urgent need to pee. She shifts under the blankets, feels something thick between her legs, something padded – a nappy? She ought to get up but the weight of the blankets... She falls back into the warm shape of her own body and lets her bladder release.

Boiling vegetables, rain and dung. Where is she? It does not smell like home. The metal rim of a spoon upon her lips, laden with something thick and warm and sweet. She must trust the hand that holds the spoon. Swallow.

Days pass.

The girl listens, her ears straining for sirens that do not come.

This place is not her home and yet, its rhythms begin to press themselves into her body. She listens to the house, its night-time ticks and clicks, the twang of ancient radiators, rats pattering along the roof beams.

Morning brings birdsong and bleating sheep. She learns to wait for the thrum of a tractor; the clatter of a metal gate. Twice a day it scrapes back and forth over concrete. Two vehicles, only one has doors. She hears a whistle, a pause, a metallic clunk. The other vehicle has a higher pitch, it makes a horrid pneumatic sound like a drill through the morning. She listens as it trails off into a whine, lost in the hiss of wind through unseen treetops.

Rain comes daily, making music on the tin roof outside: a gentle percussion that swells at times to a rousing chorus. She learns the wet trudge of the footsteps in the yard outside. The light, quick steps of the old man, the loping stride of the boy. Lunchtime brings the burr of the radio, unfamiliar tunes, indistinct voices, scraping crockery. She braces herself for the muted thud of footsteps up the carpeted stairs.

They visit at regular intervals, the man and the boy. She listens in stillness as they pray over her in their strange language, 'Amen' the solemn addendum. The girl cannot understand the words but there is a finality in their sighing and huffing. They are preparing for the inevitable. I'm going to die, she thinks. And yet, she lives.

On the fifth day, she opens her eyes.

Light. Spots of colour like the interlocking shapes in a kaleidoscope. White, yellow, brown blurs. A twist of focus and their edges wobble, shake themselves into shape, find a solid form. A woman is sitting in a wicker chair by the window. She wears a

bulky woollen jumper and mud-spattered jeans. A pair of tortoise-shell spectacles are parked half-way down her nose, and her lips move to the rhythm of the poem she is reading out loud.

Pais Dinogad sydd fraith, fraith.

O groen y bela y mae'i waith.

'Chwi! Chwi!' Chwibanwaith.

Perhaps the girl lets out a sound, for the woman looks up. Slowly, she places the book on the windowsill and claps her palm to her mouth.

"Alys!" she whispers, "Ti ar ddihun!" *You're awake.*

She kneels at the girl's bedside, presses the girl's hand to her lips.

"Diolch byth, diolch Duw, ti nôl." *Thank God you're back.*

#

It's a strange language, at once gentle and guttural, rasps of spit and hiss, and yet its rhythms are deeply familiar, like a half-remembered song.

The woman is looking at her now, one hand on the window latch.

"Ti moyn i fi agor y ffenest?"

Ffenest. Fenêtre. Window. Perhaps she is in France. The girl makes a small movement of her head – no, she does not want the window open. She feels the cold spreading inside her, bone-deep, even under the weight of the blankets. There is something pleasing in the geometric patterns of the quilt on top. If she stares at them long enough, the peppermint triangles become wings for mauve-beaked birds.

"Beth wyt ti'n cofio?" says the woman.

The girl stares at her through the cracks of her eyelids, blinks, painfully. The woman swallows hard, and as if it pains her to do so, she speaks the words in English.

“What do you remember?”

Rain. She remembers the rain. The weight of clouds upon her chest. Drowning in ice.

A sound in her throat like a gasp. Her body cannot make the words.

“Paid ti â phoeni, ’nghariad i,” the woman says. *Don’t you worry, my love.*

She places a cool hand on the girl’s cheek and smooths away a tear.

“Ti adre nawr.” *You’re home now.* “Na gyd sy’n bwysig.” *That’s all that matters.*

#

The old man and the boy come to see the miracle. They stand at the foot of the bed and while the old man smiles, the boy eyes the girl suspiciously under the slope of his thick eyebrows. He is older than her, almost a man, dark and lean and streaked with mud. Is he her brother? – she wonders. Is this her family? And if so, then why can’t she remember them?

#

Two weeks and the girl doesn’t speak a word. At first it was the pain – like chords being torn from her throat – but now, she could make a sound if she wanted to. She doesn’t want to. Her tongue lies blunt in her mouth, a dead thing.

She prefers to write notes.

She likes the way the lady reads them out in her funny upty-downty English before translating them into the other language. She knows the word for it now: kerm-rarg. At first it is just sounds, shushing and tongue tapping between breaths of air.

Slowly, her mind begins to sift through the noise, to find the space between words, to learn that the see-sawing sounds are vowels, that a purr on the tongue is an 'r'. They push the second to last beat of every word, to make the last sound soft as sand. There is a rhythm, and the girl can hear it, strong and steady as a beating heart.

The lady reads the note in her hand with a sigh.

"Who are you?" she says. "Pwy 'yf i? I'm your mam. But maybe you're angry with me. Maybe you don't want to call me Mam just yet. Mae'n iawn. It's okay. You can call me Hawys if you like."

Slowly, the girl pens another note.

"Where am I?" Hawys reads, "Ble wyt ti? You're at Yr Hafan. You're in Siôn's bed. You remember Siôn? You were always thick as thieves."

Another note.

"I want to go home."

The lady's face flickers, then she puts on a smile.

"Ti eisiau mynd adre," she says. "Well, it's probably about time. Let's get you on your feet first, shall we? You can just about see our house from the window."

The lady tugs back the blankets on the bed and cold air gushes over the girl like a roller. She takes a deep breath, braces herself against the pain in her ribs. A sound from her mouth, a gasp.

"Perhaps not today..." says the lady, "... a little too soon," and she tucks the girl back under the quilt.

The girl is grateful for the huff of warm air that reclaims her. Recovering her breath, she opens her eyes and finds that the lady is staring at her.

"Alys, fy nghariad. Mae'n flin da fi," she says. *Alys, my love, I'm sorry.* "If I could turn back time, I would, I'd do anything to take it all back."

The girl watches, round-eyed as the lady sobs and speaks and mops at her face with a hanky. Someone has embroidered the corner with a spidery blue flower. The girl wonders if it was her. Perhaps she made it for the lady as a gift.

“I had no idea what your father would do... that he would take you away from me.”

The girl listens with a detached curiosity, as if she were listening to a bedtime story.

“I was only in prison for four weeks but when I came out, you were gone. I went to the police. I tried to find you... but then I had to go into hospital for a while. You see, I hadn't just lost you, but your Aunty Gwen too. She died while I was in police custody. I couldn't go to her funeral, couldn't say goodbye and it crushed me. I suppose I lost my mind for a bit. It took me a long time to get better. When I came out of hospital, I tried again to find you. I hired a private detective. I tried....”

The lady buries her face in the bedspread. Her tears make bruises on the birds' mauve beaks. The girl wants to cry too. She cannot explain it but she feels the burden of sadness closing in around her. If she does nothing, it will take her under, like water. She reaches out to the lady, curls her fingers around her hand. Hawys looks up with puffy eyes, her mouth caught between a sob and a smile.

“I never stopped loving you,” she says, “I'm going to make it up to you. I promise. We've a second chance now. Both of us.”

The girl takes her first steps to the bathroom. She wants to be rid of the nappy. And though pain grinds through her ribs and leaves her panting for breath, she makes it. There is a mirror above the sink, a dark wooden octagon, its glass flecked with black spots. Will she know her own face when she sees it?

Grasping the porcelain rim of the sink, she looks up. A ghost girl stares back. The whites of her eyes are bloody, the surrounding skin freckled with violet specks. Otherwise, she is grey. Her skin, the colour of chewed gum, her hair, the colour of dust. She counts four red smudges on the left side of her neck. One for each finger. The welt of his thumbprint under her jaw. His face flashes into her mind and her heart clenches. Tears. She wants to scream but when she opens her mouth, no sound comes out.

Hawys is there.

“Beth sy’ bach?” *What is it, little one?* You’re out of bed! You shouldn’t be up on your own. Let me help you now.”

The girl grasps the lady’s thick, strong arms, feels herself folding against her chest. Resting her head against Hawys’s bosomy warmth, she hears the calm ticking of her heart and allows herself to be soothed.

Three weeks. Yr Hafan brims with the homely scent of stew. It is lunchtime on a Saturday and all four of them are sitting around the kitchen table, a family. The girl can walk but she will not talk. She absorbs her new world silently.

The conversation whirls around her like fog and gradually, shapes begin to appear. Sounds detach themselves from the haze of generality. A word leaps out of the dark. Once the girl has heard it, she cannot un-hear it. It is everywhere. Yowl. Teen yowl? Dar yowl. Yowl tair. She understands; it means something good.

Her eyes stray to the window. Outside, is a bright blue day. She feels an urge to breathe the sky in, as if it might inflate her lungs and raise her up like a balloon.

“Alys?”

The boy is speaking to her.

“Mwy o gawl?” he says loudly, lifting the ladle from the stew in a pantomime gesture.

He always talks to her like this; as if she were a baby, or a simpleton. She shakes her head and smiles. A gulp of laughter catches in her throat.

“Beth sy’n ddoniol?” *What’s so funny?* says the boy but he’s smiling too. He has a dimple on one cheek, or perhaps it is a smudge. She mustn’t stare too long. She picks up a hunk of cheese and scatters fragments onto the surface of her stew as she’s watched the others do.

“Perhaps we could take a walk today?” says Hawys, “get some colour in those cheeks. Would you like that Alys?”

The girl nods. Her mouth attempts to shape a sound. It is little more than a murmur but her audience is hooked.

“Yowl.”

“Iawn?” says Hawys and turning to Idris, “Did you hear that? She said *iawn!*”

The old man is smiling wider than the girl has ever seen. His teeth at the back are grey.

“Da iawn Alys!” he says, “Da iawn wir!” *Really well done.*

The excitement is daunting. The girl shrinks back into herself.

Hawys smiles and sighs and says,

“I think perhaps, it’s time for us to go home.”

The girl’s first step outside is rubber booted. In a borrowed coat, hat, and gloves, she is an astronaut stepping onto an alien planet. Light assaults her irises. A swoop of autumn air takes her breath away, tingling her skin like nettle rash.

“Wyt ti’n iawn?” says Hawys. *Are you okay?*

The girl nods and accepts the arm she is offered. Together, they make slow progress across the yard. The dog comes nosing up to them, flapping her tail like a flag.

“Gad ni fod, Nel,” says Hawys. *Leave us be.*

“Nel,” the girl says.

Hawys squeezes her shoulder.

“That’s right. Nel.”

The girl’s eyes begin to adjust to her new world. The sky is white. The ground is brown. The hills are a billowing green. There is enough space here to spread the wings of a jumbo jet, several jumbo jets. There is space here to soar.

The lower field is speckled with grazing sheep, hemmed in by a grey stone wall. Two skeletal trees stand sentry by the gatepost, their needle limbs poised to prick the clouds.

Hawys swings herself over the stile, wincing. There is something wrong with her legs. The girl has noticed it before; a hobble in her walk, a hand pressed against her hip. She feels a flush of tenderness for Hawys, and though she is not yet steady on her own feet, she doubles down her effort. She smiles through the pain.

The fields are sticky. Mud has its hold on the girl; it clings to her feet as if it would tug roots from her soles and claim her for its own.

“We’ll get you some new wellies,” says Hawys, in Welsh. “New everything. You can’t keep on wearing Gwen’s cast offs. I didn’t realise Idris still had it all. Couldn’t bring himself to give it away I suppose.”

The girl doesn’t understand what Hawys is saying but she knows the name Gwen. She’s the lady in the gilt frame on the mantelpiece at Yr Hafan. Siôn has her eyes, the same dark curls, a chin that pokes out like a cherry. The girl wonders how she died, if her spirit haunts Yr Hafan.

They walk on through the fields until they come to a bush that looks like a child's scribble. Hawys pauses here to catch her breath. A clean fence of blonde wood stands a few yards back. Beyond it, the hill plummets down into a pit, several hundred metres deep. Hawys stares down at it with such intensity that the girl wonders at its significance. It occurs to her that perhaps this is where Gwen died.

The girl looks away. There are blackberries on the bush. She reaches into the tangle and pinches a berry from its stalk. She stares at it as if this is the first time she has seen such a thing – and perhaps it is – for she has never before noticed the hairs between the tiny glossy sacks. She slots the tip of her little finger into the berry's hollow and when she looks up, she finds Hawys watching her.

"You can eat it if you like," she says, "It won't do you any harm."

The girl pops the blackberry into her mouth and wrinkles her nose.

Hawys laughs.

"Needs a bit of sugar eh? Perhaps we'll have us a crumble."

Tugging down a stringy vine, Hawys plucks the ripest berries and tosses them into the sail of her skirt. The girl watches Hawys stretch up to the best clutches, her shoulders dappled in the sunlight, silver wisps glinting at her temples. The girl feels something like happiness. A breeze lifts her hair, exposing the faded marks on her neck, yellowing now, like an old photograph.

Skirt hitched up and laden with fruit, Hawys tramps on up the hill. The girl follows a step or two behind until Hawys stops by a grand old tree, and points down the other side of the hill.

"Here we are," she says.

She's pointing at a small stone cottage. It's grey and lumpy looking but the front door is bright red, like a little tongue. The girl feels drawn to it. She hears the stream

before she spots it, running down the side of the cottage and out along the hedgerow. In front is a garden with a small lawn on one side and a vegetable patch on the other, hens pecking in the troughs. For miles around, everything is green and juicy, like the first crunch of an apple.

“Do you like it?” says Hawys, then switching to English, “This is your home.”

The girl nods though she knows it’s a lie. A place as lovely as this could never be her home. She reaches out to steady herself against the tree. Its boughs are strung with pears like bells, the colour of tarnished brass. Could she really live here? She pictures herself stepping out of that little red door, walking the length of the grey stone walls, riding a horse through the long grass. Has she ever even ridden a horse? She screws up her eyes and tells herself that she might have. She could make this place her home. She could make the words come true. Wasn’t the secret of telling a good lie, to convince the liar first? She presses her palms against the tree trunk, as if she might leave an imprint of herself there. Her fingers find a smooth channel between the cracked blocks of bark; someone has scored a name deep into the trunk. She traces the jagged letters with her fingertips: Alys.

Earlsdon Place Nursing Home, 2015.

Footsteps in the hall woke Sybil from her thoughts. She felt hot and angry but she couldn't quite recall why.

A dark head bobbed around the doorframe: Janice.

"Morning Sybil," she said, "did you press the buzzer?"

"I don't believe so," Sybil replied.

Janice's hair had been cropped even shorter than usual and she appeared to have a dirty smudge on her neck but despite these defects, Sybil welcomed the familiar face. At least Janice knew better than to use the saccharine terms of endearment that some of the casual staff had been inflicting upon her of late. Sybil had made it abundantly clear to them that she was nobody's 'sweetpea'.

"Well I'm glad you buzzed actually because I have a special delivery for you," said Janice, smiling. In an instant, Sybil was stricken by the prospect of flowers. Her heart kicked up a stink at the very notion of a bouquet – fire lilies, gerberas, yellow roses. Janice was quick to shush her concerns, a firm hand on Sybil's upper arm, a calming tone to her voice. She might have been soothing a baby.

"Calm down, there's nothing to be afraid of. It's a postcard from America that's all, a nice postcard from your... from Danni," and she held up the cardboard rectangle as if it were an expensive gift rather than a spiteful taunt. The photograph on the card was of a parade, the words 'San Francisco Mardi Gras' scrawled across it in neon pink.

"Well that looks like fun," said Janice.

Sybil eyed the dancers' sluttish apparel, a grown man adorned with makeup – it was all further testament of her son's depravity.

"I'd be happy to post a letter for you, if you'd like to write a reply."

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary,” said Sybil, placing the postcard, unread, on the arm of her chair. Janice lingered, hand on hip, close enough for Sybil to see that it was not a smudge on her neck but the creeping tendril of a new tattoo.

“As it happens,” said Sybil, “I do have a letter for Emma, to be delivered via the television production company. I should be most grateful if you could post it for me Janice.”

“Sybil, you know I’m not allowed to do that anymore. We received a ‘cease and desist’ letter...”

“Well, really. What an over-reaction! I should be able to write to my own daughter.”

“But she’s not your daughter, Sybil. She’s a complete stranger. She’s Welsh for goodness sake. Have you even been to Wales, Sybil?”

“Of course not. Ghastly place.”

Janice took a deep, patient breath.

“I know it’s hard Sybil, I know you miss Emma... but you still have Danny,” she said.

“Daniel. I christened him Daniel. Thank you Janice, that will be all,” she said.

In the quiet that followed the closing door, Sybil sat wringing her hands, gemstones clacking on her bony fingers. Against her better judgement, she scooped up her spectacles from the chain around her neck and flipped over the postcard to read its message:

Hi Mum, I hope you’re well. Thought you might like to see the fruit of my labors.

Sybil noted the incorrect spelling with a sniff.

*I had the great honor of being Chairperson of the Mardi Gras committee this year
and I'm glad to report that everything went off with a bang!*

Chair 'person' indeed.

She let the postcard slip through her fingers and glide to the floor. Did he really think that by dressing himself up as some monstrous parody of a woman, he might step into the chasm of Emma's absence? The very idea was repellant. There were some things that Sybil would not – could not – accept. She found herself drifting back again, shards of memory like iron filings, drawn to the magnetic force of the past.

#

"She's dead Sybil. Accept it."

Clive hissed the words through his teeth, beaver yellow and gnawing.

Sybil could not speak. Her thoughts were angry wasps, swarming inside her, failing to form words and take flight. Six months. No time at all. Emma might come back at any moment! And yet, Clive had made her box up Emma's things for the charity shop: every book, every poster, every item of clothing, every discarded plaything.

She waited until he'd left for golf, then made her way down to the basement. She'd hide the boxes under the camping equipment and Clive would be none the wiser. A sniff from the shadows made her jump – she banged her head on one of the low beams, her heart thumping somewhere between fear and hope. It sank when she saw Daniel, slumped drunkenly on the floor of the den, the vile creature. He was meant to be

studying at the University of Nottingham but he'd come back halfway through the second semester, claiming ill health. Clive was having none of it.

"The only mental problem he's got is that he's bone bloody idle."

For weeks now he'd been skulking about, morose and monosyllabic, as if she and Clive hadn't enough to contend with. Sybil told him straight,

"Enough is enough. You can shape up or ship out, sonny."

And then he'd had the gall to cry like a girl – as if *he* were the injured party! She slapped him – the only time she could recall doing so. Discipline was normally Clive's domain. It did the trick, however; Daniel returned to university the very next morning. He came back less frequently after that, switched courses from Political Science to some '-ology' or other and spent his summers volunteering out in Camp America.

"And he came back camp alright," Clive liked to say.

In his final year, he secured some sort of internship out there, promoting minority rights. Clive was against it.

"I tell you, if you're not a one-legged, coloured lesbian you've no hope of getting a foot on the corporate ladder these days," he said.

Daniel sent postcards, sometimes long confessional letters that Sybil would regret reading. In the old days, people didn't flaunt these things – some subjects were better off left behind closed doors.

In her worst moments a thought occurred: the wish that it was Daniel that had gone, not Emma. And when she felt that guilty pang, she'd send a cheque to America. At least she had done, in the days before Earlsdon Place, when she'd a bank account, a home, a life.

If Daniel was lost, it was the consequence of his own poor choices. Emma was a different matter altogether – her absence was not a choice. She had been snatched. It

was the only explanation. And yet, there were the flowers: gerberas, fire lilies. Wendy Paton was quite insistent. Emma had ordered them in person, paid in cash, requested that they not be delivered until the twentieth of September. It was the blasted flowers that cast doubt on everything. The local newspaper labelled Emma a 'teenage runaway'. The national press was not much interested in teenage runaways; they focused instead on the abducted schoolgirl Karen Banks. The parents made a fresh appeal on the teatime news. Clive was disgusted.

"Look at those blubbering fools, basking in their fifteen minutes of fame."

Sybil could only see herself in them. She wanted to say as much to Clive, but his anger was vicious.

"I shall never, *ever*, partake in such a demeaning, pitiful display of weakness. And neither will you. Do you hear me Sybil? I forbid it."

Without a body to mourn, Sybil tortured herself with hope. She created Emma anew every day, pieced her together from freeze frames of memory, snapped photographs, scraps of half forgotten dreams. The perfect bud of her lips, shoulder blades that sprouted from her back like wing stumps, a birthmark like spilled jam. She lay Emma's body out in the glass mausoleum of her mind, like sleeping beauty waiting to be kissed.

Wednesday morning: laundry day. Sybil was sitting in her usual position, craned towards the television when two auxiliary nurses charged in. One of them called out in a sing-song voice but Sybil couldn't make head nor tail of it. They all had funny accents in this place. The nurses began ruthlessly making the bed, conducting their conversation at an impolite volume as if Sybil were merely another chair or a wardrobe to be scooted around. The big one was Lil; she dropped her aitches and had unsightly purple streaks

in her hair. She had Sybil's pillow clutched to her chest and was systematically ramming its plump corners into a freshly starched case.

"Turn it down will you Selma?" she said to the other nurse – a plain little thing in nasty glasses.

"What is this gibberish she's got on anyway? Scots? Irish?"

"It's Welsh, I think," said Selma, and taking the remote control from the arm of Sybil's chair, she pumped down the volume button with her thumb nail. Sybil ignored her. She mustn't be distracted from the television, for at any moment now, Emma might appear on screen with a message for her.

Lil's lips thinned as she brusquely patted the pillow into shape.

"My license fee's paying for that."

Selma pulled one side of the bed-sheet taught as canvas so that Lil had to over-correct to tug it even.

"Steady on."

She sniffed. A most unsavoury habit.

"Is she Welsh then, this one?"

Selma shook her head.

"No. But I am. Well half, anyway. And if they can have an Asian network I don't see why they can't have a Welsh channel."

Lil straightened up to admire the crisp angles on her envelope corners.

"Too many channels, I reckon."

Selma passed her the coverlet.

"D'you see that John Denver documentary last night?"

"No but I love John Denver! I'll have to watch it on Catch Up.

"Tragic story – the way he died..."

“What channel?”

“BBC4. It’s all I watch.”

“I don’t suppose they’d put it on one of the main channels. Young ‘uns have probably never heard of him.”

Sybil began crooning: “You fill up my senses...”

Lil chuckled at that.

“Thought you said she was deaf as a doorpost?”

“No, not this one. You’re not deaf are you Sybil?”

“No I’m jolly well not.”

“What you doing watching this Welsh stuff then Sybil? You’re not Welsh.”

She’d not deign to answer that question. What business was it of *hers*? The hired help ought to know their place.

“And she’s gone again...” said Selma. “She lives most of her life up here, you know?” She tapped at her temple. “God knows what’s going on in there. She says that the people on telly are angels talking to her in the language of heaven.”

“Bless her.”

“I know. It’s sad.”

Their task completed, the two women were making their way towards the door when Selma turned and patted Sybil on the arm.

“You going on the outing tomorrow, sweetheart?”

Sybil’s eyes landed on Selma’s impertinent hand.

“Plenty of angels at Roedale Cathedral.”

Sybil’s head remained motionless but her eyes slid up to Selma’s smiling face, the beam of her stained teeth. Sybil turned back to the television, muttering under her breath,

“Ugly little Pug.”

Selma chose to hear something different.

“Well if you change your mind, the minibus leaves at nine...” she said, letting go of Sybil’s arm and following Lil out into the hall. The pair of them looked puffed up with pity – far too pleased with their own compassion. Sybil suspected that they’d reward themselves later with a box of Turkish Delight, purloined from her personal belongings. She’d have to be vigilant. In this place, she could trust no one.

And yet, as she sat in the aftermath of their bed-making, watching dust motes swirl like plankton in the watery afternoon sun, she had a sudden notion. What if this was the sign she had been waiting for? What if He had sent these unlikely messengers as a test of Sybil’s faith? An expedition might be the very thing – a pilgrimage, no less! The last time she’d seen Emma on television, she’d been standing outside a church. There’d been a choir, and as they’d struck up their starting notes, Emma had looked right into the camera and addressed Sybil directly with the words: ‘derma the weather guvress’. Noble words to be sure, if only Sybil could make sense of their meaning. Perhaps it was an invitation. Perhaps she was imploring her mother to come to the cathedral, to meet her there and make amends. Suddenly it all made sense. Sybil was filled with the ecstatic light of understanding and in that moment she made a resolution: by hook or by crook, she would get to that church.

Yr Hafan, 1995.

Sunday morning. The girl is dreaming of home, treading upstairs to her bedroom, a carpet of green underfoot. The wall in front of her is striped, pink and cream. There's a dado rail and above that, a pattern of meadow flowers. She turns right, towards her bedroom. Her name is on the door but she cannot read the letters; they seem to prance like ballerinas before her eyes. She pushes the brass handle and the door opens on a crater. Standing on its muddy rim, she peers into the dark. Something inside her says *jump*.

The girl wakes with a start, her heart in her throat. She reaches for the pen and notepad she keeps by the bed and scribbles down her dream. She has filled four pages with scraps like these, fragments of a different life. When she's finished, she shoves the pad and pen in the drawer of the bedside table. Hawys mustn't see.

She takes a breath, stares at the room around her: a child's bedroom, frozen in time. The walls are yellowed and spotted with oily Blu-tak stains. At the foot of the bed, where the floorboards creak, is a faded rag-rug. Upon that, is a wooden toy chest full of teddies and My Little Ponies, and a naked Tiny Tears. The girl smiled when she found that familiar relic. She remembered a little pink suit, but when she looked, she couldn't find it. A Super Ted height chart is taped to the door of the wardrobe, its last record: Alys, aged seven, 121cm tall.

An unfamiliar sound whirrs down the corridor. She didn't know Hawys had a hairdryer. She's only ever seen her dry her hair in front of the fire, a book in one hand, the other hand raking peppery curls through the splay of her fingers.

The girl gets out of bed and pads down the corridor. Shelves of books line the walls; her fingertips stroke the spines as she passes. She likes the woody scent that

comes off them, the sweet must of waiting pages. She enters Hawys's bedroom and makes herself comfortable on the unmade bed.

"Bore da 'nghariad i," says Hawys, setting the hairdryer down on the dark wood dressing table. The girl knows now how to reply, how to wish the world *good morning*. It makes Hawys's cheeks dimple, hearing her speak *Cymraeg*.

Hawys is dressed differently today. She has on a pleated skirt and a lilac blouse. She's smudging lipstick onto her cheeks.

"I thought we'd go to chapel," she says, "Now that your bruises have gone. Now that you've got some meat on those little bones."

The girl smiles shyly, hugs her knees to her chest. Her legs feel strong and substantial.

"I want to show you off," says Hawys, pausing to blot her lips on a tissue. "Best we don't say how you came back here though. People might not understand. Easier for us to say that the courts did their job and awarded me full custody. That's what should have happened anyway. What Roger did was illegal. He'd no right to take you away from me, away from your home, your language."

"Iawn," the girl replies. *Okay*.

She stares at herself in the tryptic mirror, sees the plait unravelling in her hair, the flush of sleep on her cheeks. Three images of herself stare back, each a different angle, each one true.

"It'll be all right," says Hawys, "I promise."

Dressed in her new clothes, the girl is warm and unfashionable. Under her raincoat, she wears a dull-patterned jumper and plain black trousers. Her shoes are

black and rubbery and make her think of old people. It's as if she's wearing a costume, a comforting thought; she likes performing. Something else to write in her notebook.

Bethania chapel is silvery and ancient, pleasingly symmetrical. Crossing the road, the girl looks up at its stained glass arches, crowned with circles of light. The weak winter sun is transfigured by the glass; it shines a blinding white. The girl shields her eyes, lets Hawys take her hand, and together they step inside.

The vicar is not a vicar, but a *Parchedig*. The new word rasps at the back of the girl's throat as she ponders its double meaning, for Hawys says 'parchedig' is more than a job title; the word means 'respect'. The girl eyes the man doubtfully. He wears the satisfied smile of a well-fed boy, though he must be fifty or more. Standing in the grand entranceway, he welcomes his flock, until Hawys takes him aside. The girl waits in the shadow of the porch gable. She doesn't understand what Hawys is telling him, but she understands his gasp, the firm grip with which he clasps Hawys's hands. He turns then to the girl and opens his arms.

"Mae'n wyrth," he says, beaming in the light of the miracle.

The congregation is small but fervent. There are old people and young families, but little in between. In a pew at the front sits a line of old men – the church elders perhaps. The girl listens to the sermon but makes no sense of it. Her mind begins to drift. She remembers sitting in a church hall, feeling pleased with herself, basking in applause. She was the star: Eliza.

Hawys squeezes her hand and the girl looks up. The *Parch* is looking right at her. He says something that makes the congregation burst into applause.

"Croeso adre Alys Protheroe. We're so glad to welcome you home."

The girl shrinks down into her coat collar, but manages a smile. Then it is over and the organ strikes up a new hymn. All the songs are strung on strange melodies and everyone sings their own part. The old man standing next to her booms a different tune to the lady standing behind. The girl listens as the voices rise like birds into the cold stone air, soaring and swooping in a murmur of sound. She closes her eyes, feels herself lifted on their current until the song ends.

Throughout the remainder of the service, the congregation twists and shifts to get a look at the girl. She catches their snatched glances and whispered exclamations and places her gaze in her lap, picking at a loose thread on the hem of her sleeve. And though she has enjoyed the singing, she's relieved when it's all over.

Life alters after that day in chapel. The girl becomes visible. She cycles into the village, picks up groceries from the SPAR, goes for cake in Blodwen's tearoom. People wave and smile at her, so she waves and smiles back. In this tiny community, woven tight with time, Hawys has status. Her family, the Protheroes, have lived in the *bro* for generations. Hawys is a member of the community council, editor of the *Papur Bro* and everyone knows the sacrifices she has made for the Welsh language. They know too, her personal struggles – the years she spent chasing Roger through the courts. To see justice served at last is a victory for the whole community. Returned at last to its cradle, Alys is safe. Everyone loves a happy ending. No one asks if it is too good to be true. No one, except Siôn.

#

“Put your tongue tip on the ridge behind your top teeth, and smile.”

The girl obeys. She and Hawys have been sitting at the kitchen table all morning, playing with a wooden alphabet abacus Hawys dug out from the attic. The girl spins the letters with her fingertip and tries to make their shapes in her mouth. The hardest sound is 'Ll'. She follows Hawys's instructions.

"Now, gently push the air from under your tongue."

The girl makes a sound like a hissing tyre and Hawys claps in delight.

"Da iawn," *Well done*. "You've got it. You see? Your mouth remembers the sounds. You can't forget your mother tongue."

There's a knock on the front door, the clump of boots on the flagstone porch, a whistle as Siôn lets himself into the cottage. Hawys calls out, "Yn y gegin!" *In the kitchen*.

The girl shifts in her seat, like a pigeon shuffling her feathers. Siôn's presence makes her skittish.

"Welsh lessons?" he says, smiling in the doorway. The top of his head is not far from the low-beamed ceiling.

"She's doing wonderfully," says Hawys, "Go on, show him your 'Ll'."

The girl bows her head, her cheeks flushing.

"It's all right. You don't have to," Siôn says, "You're not a performing monkey."

He stoops under the doorjamb and steps inside. His smile is wide and white. She likes its imperfection, a slight twist to the incisors on each side.

"Is it this week you're off to London?" says Hawys, in Welsh.

"Yes."

"There are perfectly good universities here in Wales, you know."

"It's just an open day. I thought it might be interesting and Osian's family have room in the car..."

"Anything to get out of helping your dad on the farm, eh?"

Embarrassment pinkens Siôn's cheeks.

"Anyway. I've come for *Y Cwrwgl*," he says, "Thought Alys might like to come and help me deliver them." The slightest hesitation in his voice as he says her name.

"Bachgen da," *Good boy*, says Hawys, making her way through to the living room, where the latest issue of the *Papur Bro* is boxed up, awaiting distribution.

The girl is staring at the kitchen table, a battered pine beast, scored with the marks of Alys's childhood. Her finger traces a sickle-shaped scorch.

"We were making Jac o'lanterns," says Siôn, "Remember?"

The girl does not remember. She shrugs.

"We almost set the table on fire."

She looks up at him, sees the skin above his eyebrows pucker and though a part of her wants to say, '*Yes, I remember*', she senses that she cannot lie to Siôn, that he sees her.

Hawys comes back to the kitchen, clutching a small pile of magazines. Siôn takes these from her, slotting them into his courier bag before turning to the girl.

"What d'you think then Alys? Want to give me a hand?"

"Iawn," she says. *Okay*.

Riding Gwen's old mountain bike, the girl follows Siôn up the incline of the paddock, the tracks of her wheels streaming like ribbons through the wet grass. A low hanging mist has draped itself over the copse, threatening any moment to dissolve into rain.

The bike is a little too large for the girl but she manages to stand upright on its pedals, pushing her upper body against the handles, treading down with her full weight. Her upper lip is slick with sweat, she feels her pulse in a vein at her temple but the

strain is satisfying; the breeze on her face, moist and clean. She feels shiny, like a new penny.

“Come on slow coach!” Siôn calls out to her and she smiles. She wonders why he is happy to speak to her in English, when Hawys cannot bear to.

Over the paddock and down past Yr Hafan, they keep pedalling until they come to a lane at the bottom of the lower field, banked high with grasses and thistles, hollow stalks of cow parsley. The girl listens to the quiet tick of spokes as Siôn’s bike slows, coming to a stop outside a wide metal gate. A large stone, painted white, bears the word ‘Hendre’. Siôn pulls a copy of *Y Cwrwgl* out of his bag and hands it to the girl. She shakes her head and he laughs at her.

“You never used to be shy. *lawn*, I’ll go.”

She watches him climb over the gate and stride down towards the long white farmhouse. It is so quiet here. She cannot hear anything but the wind in the blackened branches above, a bird rooting about in the leaf litter. A breeze chases around her shoulders, cooling the sweat on her neck, and though her bruises are gone, she feels a tremor of fear when she touches the skin there. An image comes to her, unbidden: a man’s face, creased in laughter, eyes shining. He reaches out gently to touch her face and his name lands on the tip of her tongue.

When Siôn returns to the lane, he finds Alys crouched down on the grass verge with her head in her hands. Her breath comes fast and shallow.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Siôn asks.

He kneels on the wet grass and takes her hands in his own.

“Deep breaths now,” he says, “Nice and slow.”

When she raises her face, it is grey, her lips purpling in the cold.

“I thought he loved me,” she says.

“Who? Your dad?”

But she will not answer. She closes in on herself, retreats into the fist of her own mind, balled tight against the past.

Siôn takes Alys up to the ruins of Castell Dryslwyn. They ditch their bikes at the bottom of the hill and make their way on foot up the steep green slope, kicking through thistles and sheep droppings, until the path merges with a stack of rough stone steps that stagger up the hillside.

“We used to come up here,” says Siôn, “When Hawys and Uncle Roger were fighting. Remember that bow and arrow you had? With the suction cup on the end? Left a massive red mark on my forehead... Mam went mental.”

Siôn laughs but the girl does not answer. Her eyes are fixed on the castle as it rises up from the rubble, a snaggle-toothed colossus. She has never seen such a thing. Its towers have tumbled, its curtain walls are stumps and yet the castle endures.

The wind up here is sharp and wild; it whips her hair against her cheeks. She steadies herself on a rocky wall, keeps going until she crests the hill and when she looks out, her breath catches in her chest. The land rolls out below her like a woven cloth, checkered green and seamed with ancient hedges, lines of naked trees and in the distance, a forest, dark as any fairytale. Winding through it all is the swollen Tywi, glimmering with fresh rain.

“It’s beautiful,” the girl says.

Siôn shrugs.

“I suppose it is.”

He settles down on a low stone wall, presses his back against its heft.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? How little you remember.”

“Hawys says it’s because of the accident.”

“Do you remember the accident?”

Her mind conjures a car, branches thrashing against the windscreen, a sensation of falling, like the jolt before sleep.

She nods and says, “A little.”

Siôn takes a moment to choose the right words.

“Do you remember who was driving?”

A name on the tip of her tongue. She shakes her head.

“Terrence Timson,” says Siôn, “His name was in the newspaper.”

The girl sees him again, smiling in her mind’s eye. Curtains of dark hair fall around his eyes.

Siôn studies her face.

“You remember him, don’t you?” he says.

The girl nods.

“What else do you remember?”

She tells Siôn about the notepad she has been keeping by her bed, the fragments that keep surfacing. Something new: her mother’s fingers, glinting with rings.

“Please don’t tell Hawys,” the girl says, “I don’t want to upset her, not after everything she’s done for me.”

Siôn turns away from her, casts his gaze out across the vale.

“This is bonkers,” he says.

On the opposite side of the valley, Paxton’s Tower stands on the brow of the hill, a toy-sized monolith. Siôn wonders briefly if someone might be standing in one of its turrets, staring back at him, waiting to see what he will do next.

“Okay. I won’t say anything for now,” says Siôn, “But we’ve got to find out who you are.”

He turns now to look at the girl. Hunkered in the shadow of the castle, she draws her knees up to her chest, holds herself tight against the wind.

“One thing’s for sure,” says Siôn, “You’re not Alys.”

Roedale, 2015.

Kate lay brooding in the bath; a rare indulgence but one she felt she deserved, today of all days. She'd been waiting for this for years: a body. And though it wasn't yet confirmed, the body in the park had to be Emma. Who else could it be? She watched the surface of the bathwater swell around her limbs, rafts of bubbles like drifting continents.

Twenty years. There would be little more than bones picked clean, wriggling with insects. Kate squeezed her eyes against the image, let her head sink down under the water. At least now there'd be a murder investigation. Kate had a good relationship with Craig Kennedy on the Major Crime unit. Perhaps she'd drop him a line. He didn't need to know that she was still on maternity leave.

What stories lay in that body? she wondered, coming up for breath. Water slapped the sides of the bath as she stared at her own flaccid stomach, the pale scars that wormed around her hips, evidence of the lives she'd carried.

Perhaps they'd find traces of DNA. Science had come a long way since 1995. Kate dared not hope but the thought persisted: might she be vindicated at last?

The policewoman had scoffed at the time. PC Blakey: she of the shoe in the sandwich bag. DCI Blakey by now. Kate remembered her, young and beaky, perched on the edge of Clementine's floral sofa, notebook and pen in hand. She'd nodded sympathetically while Kate attempted to make a statement about Emma's disappearance and Kate watched her pen, circling the air above the empty page. Just when Kate thought she was about to write something down, Blakey used the lid of the pen to scratch discreetly at the eczema between her fingers.

“Terry Timson?” she said, “Lovely Terry from the sweet shop? Do you know how much that man has done for our local community? He fundraised thousands to put a new roof on the church hall.”

“I know. I went to drama club there,” said Kate.

“And he ran that club for free,” said Blakey. “Never charged a penny...”

“It was him, I know it.”

The police officer placed the cap back on her pen.

“How do you know?” she said, “What evidence do you have?”

“They were dating,” said Kate.

PC Blakey snorted.

“In Emma’s dreams perhaps. You know, it’s very common, for a young girl such as yourself to develop a crush... and to feel hurt – perhaps embarrassed – when that crush isn’t reciprocated.”

“I don’t have a crush on Terry.”

Clementine tutted quietly. She was sitting on the matching floral armchair, trying to appear supportive.

“Now come on Kate, that’s not strictly true, is it? I picked up a thing or two ferrying you girls back and forth to drama club. You both thought Terry was rather wonderful.”

“I hate him,” said Kate.

“Well,” said PC Blakey, “The poor man’s dead and he can’t defend himself and you’ve absolutely no evidence, so I suggest we let sleeping dogs lie.”

“What about the car? Have you dusted it for Emma’s fingerprints?”

“From what we managed to salvage of the car, all the evidence suggests that Terry was travelling alone.”

“What if someone got rid of the evidence?”

Blakey smiled, kindly.

“Who?”

“I don’t know... but you’ve got to admit it’s a bit of a coincidence that Emma and Terry should both disappear at the same time.”

“But Terry didn’t disappear. He told his family where he was going; he’d booked a ferry ticket from Fishguard to Rosslare. The road where he crashed is en route to the port. We even spoke to his girlfriend in Ireland.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Yes. He was planning to move in with her. Poor woman is distraught.”

“It’s tragic,” said Clementine. Kate wanted to scream. She heard them murmuring in the hallway as Clementine ushered Blakey out:

“It’s all the TV these kids watch...”

#

Kate slammed down her knees and sent water sluicing over the rim of the bath, soaking the bathmat and spattering the mirror.

“Are you okay in there?”

It was Jade, tapping on the door of the bathroom.

“I’m fine. Has Bobby woken up?”

“No. He’s still sleeping. I just... I thought you slipped or something.”

Kate swallowed hard.

“I’m fine darling.”

“Okay. Sorry. I’ll go away.”

There was a pause, but no sound of footsteps down the corridor.

“Actually can I come in for a wee?”

Jade slipped through the door and into the steam, fanning her face in complaint.

“So,” she said, settling down on the loo, “The body. Do you think it’s your friend, Emma?”

“I don’t know.”

“If it is her... at least it might be like, you know, closure or something.”

Kate put on a Californian accent, loaded with vocal fry.

“Like, closure...?”

Jade buckled up her jeans, washed her hands, then sat down on the floor by the bath.

“I saw that you burned your old diary.”

Kate nodded, began briskly soaping herself.

“Why? What was in there?”

“Oh nothing really. Just the usual embarrassing teenage stuff.”

“I thought maybe there was something in there about me and that’s why you freaked out.”

“No darling, it was before you were born...”

“Because you know, I totally get it. You probably thought about getting rid of me.” Jade spoke quickly, not allowing her mother to contradict her, “and I’m fine with that, really. I mean, if I got knocked up now, I’d totally get rid of it.”

Kate sat up straight and stared at Jade.

“You listen to me. I never regretted having you. I was so lost after Emma disappeared, I got really depressed. If you hadn’t come along, I don’t know what I might have done. You saved me, Jade.”

Jade blushed, her hands shrinking into the sleeves of her hoodie.

"Pity I couldn't save my dad," she said.

"That wasn't anything to do with you," said Kate. "Truly. He loved you so much. If anyone's to blame, it's me, but we were so young. If I could go back, I'd do so many things differently. Not you though. I wouldn't change anything about you, my love."

Jade looked relieved when Bobby began to wail down the hall.

"I'll go," she said, springing to her feet. She slipped out of the bathroom before Kate could say any more.

Draining the bathwater, Kate dried herself brusquely. Rubbing the soupy flesh of her belly, she thought about the day she discovered she was pregnant.

#

The weeks following Emma's disappearance had been black. Kate had slipped into a waking darkness. She couldn't sleep and wouldn't eat and once her claims about Terry Timson had been dismissed, she gave up talking too.

Clementine took her to the doctor.

"I thought she was depressed," she told Dr. Anscombe. "I didn't expect this."

The doctor plaited his fingers, tapping his thumbs together.

"Yes. Well, it's standard procedure with a blood test. We usually just rule pregnancy out," he said, "I expect you'll want to have a conversation."

Clementine hustled Kate back into the car, and they sat for a while in the surgery car park, staring at a crippled pigeon, hobbling over the forecourt. Clementine placed her hand on Kate's knee.

"It'll be all right," she said. "Me and Dad will support you, whatever you decide."

Kate stared out the window, sickened by her own filth. Everyone would know now. She was tainted. She would have to wear her deepest, private shame on her flesh, ballooning for the world to see. She opened her mouth to speak but Clementine went on.

“It’s your body. Your decision. I know Luke’s family is religious but you mustn’t let that sway you. If you decide you don’t want to be a mother just yet, we don’t have to tell Luke at all.”

Luke. Of course, Clementine would assume it was Luke. Kate had been going out with him for over a year. Clementine thought he was charming, a perfect first boyfriend. She didn’t know that since Emma’s disappearance, Luke’s visits had become a test of Kate’s endurance, that his touch repulsed her, the smell of his sweat made her retch. There was a dividing line in Kate’s mind: before *the night of*, and after. Before that line, Luke had been everything. After, he might as well be dead.

The words were half-formed in Kate’s mind. She’d been about to confess everything to Clementine: getting turned away from the pub, the light on in the church hall, the taste of salt on Terry’s palm. But now, a new path unfurled before her. Her breath caught in her throat. No one need know. She could conceal her shame and humiliation in silence. She could tell a different story; she could make it a love story.

Luke cried when Kate told him the news. They were sitting on her bed, backs pressed against the chintz wallpaper. He’d assumed she was going to break up with him. Assumed and hoped, perhaps. He’d tried to be supportive since Emma’s disappearance but the burden was too great. He didn’t know what to say to Kate, how to make things better.

She watched his jaw pulsing with the effort of trying not to cry.

“It’s a punishment from God,” he said.

“It’s not a punishment, it’s a baby.”

“I don’t understand how. I mean, when...?”

“It must have been that night we were going to watch *The Piano*.”

She’d gone round to watch a video while Luke’s parents were out at bible study group. Beryl had bought them a frozen pizza from Safeway, which they were allowed to eat on a tray in the lounge, provided they promised not to make crumbs. Instead of watching the video, Kate and Luke went upstairs to Luke’s pinstriped bedroom, clumsily undressed and clambered under his Batman bedspread.

Whether it was religious guilt or the miniature bottle of Lambrusco they’d stolen from the pantry, something went awry. Luke’s *thing* wouldn’t stand up. Kate did her best to shove it inside her but it just wouldn’t stay there. She tried to help things along with her hand but that was a mistake. It was over in an instant. She pulled a tissue from the box next to Luke’s bed and mopped up the mess on her thighs while Luke knelt down at the side of the bed and prayed.

“Forgive me Lord, I allowed the serpent to tempt me, she led me into sin and I followed.”

Kate noted the word ‘her’ and wondered if she was the serpent. She’d swung out of bed and quickly got dressed.

“I should go,” she’d said, hoping that Luke would stop her and tell her that he was sorry. Instead, he’d said, “Yes, I think that’s a good idea.”

She’d left his house feeling hurt and confused. She hadn’t even been sure if she was still a virgin.

Eight weeks later and here they were, sitting on Kate's single bed, staring at a terrifying future. Luke squeezed Kate's pillow against his chest. His eyes slunk furtively to her face. Seized by a sudden impulse, he whispered,

"We could go to a private clinic; no one would know."

Kate glanced at her bedroom door.

"Mum knows."

She read the dismay on his face, the shame he felt at his own suggestion.

"I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. I wouldn't –"

Still, they both knew that he would.

A wretched silence stretched between them, taut as a wrung sheet.

When at last she spoke, Kate's voice was determined.

"I'm not asking you for anything," she said. "I'm telling you because you have a right to know."

Luke looked up at her, his lashes forked with tears and Kate felt the gnawings of guilt inside her.

"You should stick to the plan," she said, "Go to Oxford. I can do this on my own."

"No," he said. "This is God's will." He swallowed hard, his adam's apple sharp in his throat. "We can be a family; we can make it work."

For a time, it did work. Luke was accepted onto a training scheme at an insurance firm in Roedale. While he saved for a flat, Kate studied for GCSEs she would be unable to sit, for the baby came three weeks early. Clementine suggested that Luke move in to The Laurels, an arrangement to which Luke's parents were anxiously opposed, their suggestion of a 'quiet, private, wedding' having been roundly refused. In the days following Jade's birth, they found excuses not to visit their baby granddaughter and as the days rolled into weeks, their shame congealed into an ultimatum. Luke must

choose: either a life in the church with his parents or a life of sin with Kate. But by that point, it was too late – Luke was in love. He had felt the gentle weight of his baby upon his chest; her tiny body curled like a comma under his palm. He had already made his choice: he chose Jade.

Kate stepped out of the bath and rubbed her hair vigorously, as if the action might erase the words shooting through her thoughts: *terrible, terrible person. Disgusting. Cruel.* She fought back with the same argument she had told herself at the time: it *could* have been true. It *might as well* have been. And how could she possibly know what Luke would do when he discovered the truth? When a routine blood test revealed that he had sacrificed his entire future for a lie, that he had lost his parents for nothing, that baby Jade was not his to love.

It was Kate's father, Art, who found Luke, hanging from a beech tree in the woods that edged Roedale Park – no note, no explanation, no need. Kate knew that she was to blame and while she hated herself for it, she also knew that she would do it again – for Jade. For as the years went by, Kate's lie, conceived in shame, grew into a thing of beauty. She loved her daughter with a ferocity she'd never expected and when Jade asked her, as children always do, the story of her beginnings, Kate could tell her a tale worth hearing. Kate was a Capulet, Luke was a Montague and Jade, the joyous product of their tragic love story. It was a work of fiction, a fabulous lie, and Kate's greatest act of love.

Yr Hafan, 1995.

Sunday evening. Hawys and the girl are at Yr Hafan, re-heating the leftovers from lunch. Hawys shows the girl how to squash the chopped vegetables into patties, ready to fry on the aga hob. As the cast iron pan begins to crackle, it brings to mind a song the girl has learned, a nursery rhyme about sailing to sea in a frying pan. Her hands tap the patties to the rhythm of the verse: *Fuoch chi erioed yn morio? Wel do, mewn padell ffrio...*

Idris is seated at the kitchen table, The Western Mail spread before him. He reads the crossword clue out loud again, in his strange, staccato English.

“Play in which an angry king makes a statue of his wife and sends his heir to the wolves....” He sniffs. “Sounds Greek.”

He has a habit of bouncing his knee so that his slipper makes a little clapping sound on the sole of his foot.

“Shakespeare,” says Hawys, then, turning to Welsh, “Do stop making that irritating noise.”

“What noise?”

“With your slipper. Try King Lear.”

“I wasn’t aware I was doing anything. No, King Lear doesn’t fit.”

It’s a peculiar phenomenon, but the girl understands this gentle to-ing and fro-ing. Not the words exactly, but the sense. She knows it is the noise that has annoyed Hawys and that Idris is indifferent to it. She knows that there is affection in their mutual irritation, a familial intimacy. And while she is thinking of these things and delivering the first batch of bubble and squeak to the table, the answer comes to her.

“The Winter’s Tale.”

Idris looks up, a smile of faint disbelief playing around his mouth.

“Well now, let’s see if it fits.”

He mouths the English letters, trying them out in the squares.

“The Winter’s Tale. There we are. Well fancy you knowing that, Alys. Perhaps your memory is coming back after all.”

Hawys stiffens when he says this and the girl sits down, shovelling a forkful of potato into her mouth so she doesn’t have to speak. For the truth is, her memories have been flocking home. A bird or two at first: her name, her father, Terry, but once she had admitted these harbingers, then came the colony. Memories ambush her dreams. She wakes from night terrors in which she is trapped under water, the crush of oceans upon her chest, unable to scream, for if she opens her mouth, she will drown. Hawys comes to her on nights like these, holds her simply against her chest, and rocks her back to sleep, as if she were a girl of five, not fifteen.

Siôn’s footsteps in the yard outside wake Alys from her thoughts; she hears his familiar whistle as he comes through the door.

“Shw’mae,” he says.

It’s a word she hears a lot – a greeting that sometimes seems to mean *hello* and other times, *how are you?* There’s a brief flurry of excitement as Siôn is welcomed back home. He dumps his coat and bag at the door and drags a chair to the cluttered table.

“Hope you saved some for me,” he says.

Idris and Hawys ask him questions about London and the University open day and the girl tries to make sense of their words. The landscape of their language is familiar now. Her mind has opened to this new terrain, she recognises its topography, the lisps and crags of consonants, valleys of ancient vowels. There are markers too, familiar words to cling to, as she fumbles towards understanding. The word *mawr* makes a sound like ‘now’. The university is *big*. Dither-oral. *Diddorol*. Interesting.

Perhaps he means the course. There are new words too, she hears them repeated but she cannot make them out. *Teithio. Drud.*

“Wyt ti’n deall?” Hawys asks.

The girl shakes her head, no, she doesn’t understand.

“Siôn says it’s expensive to get about in London. *Drud.*”

A flash-frame of memory. The girl is travelling on a train, an orange ticket in her hand. London. Phantom. Terry kissed the back of her hand: ‘I am your angel of music.’

“How are the Welsh lessons coming along?” Siôn asks.

The girl shakes her head at the memory.

“Iawn,” she says, and turning to the window, she points at the spots of rain gathering on the glass outside.

“Mae’n bwrw glaw,” she says. *It’s raining.*

Hawys smiles with delight and it gives the girl pleasure, to feel the power of her words. With a simple phrase, she has filled the room with joy. She wants to feel that pleasure again.

“Bwrw glaw yn sobor iawn,” she says. *It’s raining hard.*

“Ydy,” says Siôn, laughing. *So it is.*

When the food is all gone, Siôn suggests that he and Alys do the dishes. Hawys and Idris go through to the lounge to watch the *Pobol y Cwm* omnibus and when he is sure that they are alone, Siôn takes the girl’s hand. He bends down to her so that for a moment she thinks he is going to kiss her. Instead, he whispers excitedly in English,

“I didn’t even go to the open day. I got a lift to London with Osian and I got a train to Roedale. It was only about forty minutes away.”

He searches her face for a flicker of recognition.

“Roedale?” he says, “Doesn’t that ring any bells?”

For a suspended moment, she says nothing, dares not even to breathe.

“Roedale is your home town,” says Siôn. “I know who you are.”

Siôn closes the kitchen door and goes over to his rucksack. In the moment that his back turns, the girl is struck by a bolt of fear, her heart a spooked mare, galloping wildly.

“It said in the Western Mail that Terrence Timson was from Roedale, in Surrey,” says Siôn, “so I guessed that you might be from there too.”

He lets out a small laugh.

“I can’t believe how easy it was.”

Rummaging around in his bag, he pulls out a rolled up newspaper.

“Are you ready for this?” he says, placing the paper on the kitchen table. The girl nods.

“This was pinned to the noticeboard at Roedale train station.”

Siôn unrolls the newspaper, flattening it down with the palms of his hands. He takes the sugar bowl and uses it as a paperweight. Concealed inside the newspaper is an A4 poster, printed with the words: Surrey Police. Missing Person. Appeal for Information.

Below, is a photograph of the girl. She is wearing a burgundy school uniform that is too big for her. Her pale brown hair is neatly combed and her eyes are shark-grey. The smile she wears is small and tight, as if she is hiding something. Train tracks. They

don't show in the picture, but the girl feels the memory of them with her tongue, blocks of metal and wire, long since removed. She remembers this photo being taken. She remembers. And it is not relief that ripples through her, but dread.

Siôn studies her reaction, his eyes fixed on the tremble at the edge of her mouth.

"Your name is Emma Granger," he says, tapping the printed text. "All you have to do is call this number and you can go home."

The girl folds in on herself, the hinges of her limbs, her hips, her spine, snapping closed until she is hunched down on the flagstone floor, one hand grasping at the table leg as if it might stop her from being washed away. Siôn sinks to his haunches, encircles her in his arms.

"It's okay. You're okay." he says. "Slow and steady now. Breathe."

This is how Idris finds them when he comes into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Nel taps after him, her tail beating limply.

"What is it?" says Idris, "What's happened?"

The dog noses into the crisis, offering herself to be stroked but Siôn pushes her away with the heel of his palm.

"Ble mae Anti Hawys?" he asks Idris.

Idris replies that Hawys is upstairs in the bathroom.

"Iawn. *Good.* Close the door."

Idris does as he is asked.

"Beth sy'n digwydd?" *What's going on?* he says. Then, turning to English, "Alys? Are you all right?"

His hand hovers above the curve of her spine. She does not reply.

Siôn nods his head towards the kitchen table and when Idris sees the poster, his face pales. He drags a hand over his cheeks, down his corded neck.

“Iesu mawr.” *Christ.* “We’ve got to call the police.”

“No,” the girl sobs, struggling out of Siôn’s embrace. “Don’t call anyone.” She gets to her feet and walks over to the window, steadying herself on the thick porcelain sink. She turns on the tap and splashes her face with cold water.

Idris studies the poster, his fingers tracing the lines of print.

“Where did you get this?” he says and Siôn has to confess his lie.

“I was going to tell you and Aunty Hawys... I just thought Alys had a right to know first. I thought she’d be happy.”

“Hawys isn’t going to take it well,” says Idris.

Siôn catches something in the tail of his eye, a glimmering. He turns to see the girl has plucked a knife from the draining board. She holds the blade against her upturned forearm.

“Don’t you dare tell Hawys,” she says. “Don’t you dare.”

“Put it down, girl,” Idris says firmly. He takes a step towards her, a gentler tone.

“Dere nawr Alys.” *Come now.*

“Emma.” says Siôn.

When she hears her name, the girl takes the pointed tip of the blade and presses it into the pale skin of her wrist. A bead of blood springs up. Siôn is on his feet, barely a stride away. He moves slyly towards her, his hand shaping a swift arc through the air, encircling the girl’s arm. With his other hand, he twists the knife out of her grip and tosses it into the sink. The girl does not resist, she lets him hold her tight against his chest, her breath slackening in his embrace, her tears soaking the front of his t-shirt. Nel pads over to them. She nuzzles into the space between their shaking bodies and the girl strokes her silky ears.

Muffled sounds come from upstairs: the toilet flushing, a running tap, feet lumbering downstairs. The girl begins to whimper.

“Please don’t tell Hawys,” she says.

Idris rolls the poster back up in the newspaper just as Hawys comes through the wood-panelled door.

“What’s going on?” she says. “Is everything all right?”

Breaking free from Siôn, the girl fakes a bright smile.

“Just a little washing up accident,” she says, offering up her wrist to Hawys. “A scratch, that’s all.”

Hawys inspects the tiny puncture mark, a whisker of smudged blood.

“I’ve got some TCP at home,” she says. “We should get going anyway,” and she blunders about collecting coats and bags, ignorant of the look that passes between Siôn, Idris and the girl, oblivious to the secret that weighs between them.

After they’ve gone, Idris makes a pot of tea. He and Siôn sit down at the hulking oak table. Idris tips a dribble of milk into his cup and tries to imagine how Gwen would deal with this situation.

“You shouldn’t have lied,” he says. “You should have come to me.”

Siôn is chiselling at a stain on the table with his thumbnail.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he says. He looks up at Idris, his tone defensive. “But you were acting like it was normal, like we should just take Aunty Hawys’s word for it that Alys was home.”

Idris works his knuckle into the joint of his jaw, stretching out the muscle. He takes a breath that turns into a yawn. How old he looks, Siôn thinks. How tired.

“I’m not stupid,” says Idris, “But it’s complicated. There are things you’re too young to understand.”

“Like what?”

Idris levels his eyes at Siôn, a warning in his hooded expression. He speaks carefully.

“I haven’t always been a good friend to Hawys,” he says. “I owed it to her this time, to give her the benefit of the doubt.”

Siôn sits up in his chair. Straight-backed, he has an inch or more on his father.

“Because of Uncle Roger?” he says.

Idris tilts his head slightly.

“He was violent, wasn’t he?” says Siôn.

Idris draws a whistly breath through his nose.

“You’ve got it wrong boy.”

“Aunty Hawys was always turning up here in the middle of the night. Me and Alys used to sleep top and tail. I remember stuff, you know?”

“He didn’t hit her,” says Idris, raking his fingernails over his stubble. Then, as an after thought, “He didn’t need to.”

“What does that mean?” says Siôn.

Idris places his palm on the table. The subject is closed. He picks up the newspaper.

“This is what we need to be discussing,” he says.

As he pulls out the poster of Emma Granger from the newspaper, the rolled ends bounce back together.

“I think she remembers more than she’s saying,” says Siôn. “She admitted to me a week ago that stuff has been coming back to her.”

“You think she’s been faking it?”

Siôn shrugs. “Maybe.”

He nudges the newspaper towards Idris.

“Read that.”

Idris pulls the scrolled paper open and reads the headline: Surrey Police scale down search for missing teenager.

“Where did you get this?” he says.

“Newsagent’s in Roedale.”

“Has Alys seen it?”

“Emma. No. She freaked out before I got a chance.”

Emma Granger, a fifteen-year-old student at Roedale School, has not been seen since the twentieth of September when she was seen entering Roedale Park. Items of Emma’s clothing were found beside Roedale Pond. Dozens of volunteers joined police teams and search dogs in the hunt for the missing teenager.

Ch Insp Graham Sharman said: "Once again, I would seek this opportunity to voice my appreciation to those volunteers who have provided tremendous support during this investigation.

"It has now been eight weeks since Emma was last seen and we remain concerned for her welfare. Co-ordinated volunteer searches have now concluded but I would stress that this is still a missing person inquiry and investigations remain ongoing.

Idris looks up at Siôn, his face twitching with incredulity.

“They’ve given up.”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“Her parents must be – I’d be furious.”

“Well here’s the thing. They’ve not made any comment. All the appeals for information have gone through the police.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked the newsagent if she had any back copies of the local newspapers and she said no, they have to return them to the distributor but the library has copies on microfiche. So I walked over there. It turns out they keep back copies for a year before they send them off to be scanned.”

Siôn steps over to his bag and pulls out a wedge of white paper.

“The librarian wouldn’t let me take them away but I photocopied some of the articles.”

He dumps the load on the table.

“Took me ages,” he says, and licking a fingertip, he begins to riffle through the papers. When he finds what he’s looking for, he tugs the page out from the sheaf and passes it to Idris.

Dad’s lover steps forward in hunt for missing Emma.

The father of a missing teenager was released from police custody without charge after a witness came forward to account for his whereabouts on the day of his daughter’s disappearance. A member of staff at the Margam Hotel, London, confirmed Sheena Goodman’s account that she and Clive Granger were staying at the hotel on the 20th September.

Gina Burrows, a local neighbour, said: "The Grangers are a good, church going family and I think their privacy should be respected."

Anne Cummings, a spokeswoman for local charity 'Missing Lives', has been offering support to the family of the missing teenager. She said, "An unhappy home life is the primary reason that teenagers run away from home."

Mr and Mrs Granger have declined to comment.

"Bastard journalists," says Idris. "You'd think they'd focus on the girl, not the parents' love life."

"A bit odd though," says Siôn. "Don't you think? The parents refusing to comment. I looked through all the copies I could find. I couldn't find anything from them. No statement. No 'please come home' message. Nothing. It makes you wonder. Maybe she had a good reason for running away."

Idris turns down the corners of his mouth.

"What about the man?"

"Terrence Timson? Oh, there's loads about him... Charity fun runs, amateur dramatics. The best bit? They've put up a memorial plaque."

Siôn thumbs through the photocopies, pulls out a frontpage splash. Smiling, relaxed, Terrence Timson's image fills half the page. He's holding a giant cheque, most of which has been cropped out to make space for his face. It is a handsome face, too, angular and symmetrical. Idris snarls at the headline.

"Tributes to local hero killed in tragic road crash."

"Makes you sick doesn't it?" says Siôn.

Idris sits back in his chair, locks his fingers behind his head.

“I don’t know,” he mutters, arching his spine. “I just don’t know.”

He gets up and paces the length of the kitchen, the palm of his hand on his forehead, smoothing back silvery strips of hair. Siôn watches, relieved that the matter is out of his hands now, that the responsibility for what happens next, falls on his father’s shoulders. The room is perfectly quiet, but for the sound of Idris’s steps on the stone flags, and the small thuds of moths outside, butting against the kitchen window, leaving dusty plumes on the glass.

“I’m going to call that number,” says Idris.

He picks up the poster and takes it over to the wall on which the new telephone hangs.

“Dad, maybe – ”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

He picks up the receiver, dials the number and waits. The new phone is cordless but he stands next to the socket, drumming his fingers on the doorframe as he’s always done. His face settles into a determined frown. The line rings with a purr, a click, a pause.

You have dialled the non-emergency line for Surrey Police. All our operators are busy at the moment. If your matter is urgent, please hang up and redial 999. Otherwise, please hold the line.

He waits a minute, two minutes, hangs up.

“We’ll sleep on it,” he says, “Things will be clearer in the morning.”

Earlsdon Place, 2015.

Sybil was seated at her dressing table, trying to decide between pearls and peridots. The pearls had belonged to her mother; she wasn't sure where the peridots had come from. She clipped them onto her earlobes and smiled at the result. Quite satisfactory. She'd chosen a pair of navy slacks and a cream blouse with an elegant pussy bow that hid a missing button – the work of but five minutes to mend. She'd been asking for her sewing box for weeks but Janice would not oblige. Most likely, she didn't trust Sybil with the needles. Quite right too – Sybil would have delighted in seeing off that nuisance Hillary with a well-aimed jab in the buttock. She chuckled at the thought of it. But when she looked up she found that it wasn't she who was laughing but a haggard old crone with teeth the colour of custard.

The bell rang in the hall outside and Sybil gathered together her belongings; a practical navy cagoule and a black patent clutch bag. The thump of closing doors in the corridor sounded final.

“Better get a shimmy on,” she said to no one but herself and taking one last glance over her room, she marched out to join the expedition.

“Oh no no no no,” said Rita as Sybil approached, “you're not on the list today darling.”

Rita was a new addition to Earlsdon Park – a bulky woman in her fifties, with a thick neck and combed out curls, gathered on the top of her head like a pom-pom. She headed towards Sybil in a quite unnecessary manner, her arms outstretched like a sportswoman about to make a catch.

“But I have a candle to light,” said Sybil, fumbling in her clutch for the pale wax disc.

“I know my darling but we can go another day.”

“But it has to be today. It’s the anniversary today.”

A chink of uncertainty in Rita’s eyes. Perhaps she’d missed the e-mail; it had been a busy morning. Taking advantage of this momentary indecision, Sybil continued to march towards the entrance hall, where a cluster of adventurers waited patiently for their minibus to arrive. An elderly gent tipped his hat at her.

The great oak panelled doors had been thrown open, casting a golden sickle of autumn sunshine across the paisley carpet. It seemed to Sybil like the beneficent smile of Jesus himself. Indeed, she felt quite infused with His light this morning. The spirit was in her; she could feel Him working through her. Today would be a good day.

“Nora! Catch that one – she’s not on the list,” Rita called out down the hall.

“Her name is Sybil,” said Nora, with a reproachful glare that took Sybil by surprise. The ‘black’ nurse (Sybil couldn’t bring herself to say that word in anything but a hushed tone) was still rather new and since her specialty was the nutcases, their paths had rarely crossed.

“Do please excuse the imposition,” Sybil said to her now, “but I should very much like to light a candle for my daughter today, at the cathedral.”

Nora’s face was round and kind. A golden crucifix hung on a tight little chain around her throat.

“I’m sorry Sybil, but Janice has left strict instructions that you’re not to leave Earlsdon Park.”

“And where may I ask, is Janice? Perhaps I could have a word with her myself?”

“It’s her day off today, Sybil. She’ll be back in tomorrow, you can talk it over then.”

“But don’t you see? It will be too late by then.”

Nora pressed her lips together, her eyes locked on Sybil's, as if the older woman's trustworthiness might be detectable in the blue of her irises.

"Please," said Sybil.

What harm could it do, if she wanted to pray, to light a candle for her missing child? Nora had seen the television appeal. She'd watched that poor sweet girl Kate, having to step up to the mark because Clive Granger refused to talk to the press. What kind of a man wouldn't move heaven and earth to look for his own child? She had a good idea exactly what kind. Still, all the charges had been dropped; he'd been proven innocent and she knew she ought to be Christian about the whole thing. Especially now that they'd found a body in the park. It hadn't yet been identified but it was bound to be Emma Granger.

"Very well then," said Nora, quietly – so quietly that Rita didn't hear and came bounding up to Sybil, ready to wrestle her to the ground if necessary.

"It's okay Rita. I'll take it from here," said Nora, proffering the flat of her palm.

There was authority in that movement; Rita stopped in her tracks.

"Nora, what are you doing? Janice said – "

"Well Janice isn't here and I am not about to stand in the way if this lady wants to worship her Lord."

Quite right, thought Sybil. This Nora woman was growing on her already. She had her hair arranged in ever so many rows of plaits. It was rather becoming. She had an urge to reach out and touch one, just to see what it felt like. But as if Nora had heard the thought, she widened her eyes at Sybil, a warning in the angle of her chin.

"Don't make me regret this now Sybil."

"I shan't let you down, Matron."

"Nora. Just Nora is fine."

There were eight of them on the minibus. Sybil nodded at the ladies she knew from the arts and crafts afternoons. No idea of their names but the chubby one was a prolific knitter. In fact she looked quite bereft without a pool of yarn in her lap, needles clacking like billy-o. Sybil smiled at her and received a prim nod in return. Her neighbour, Ken, was there, nicely turned out in a silk cravat and driving cap. The wall between their rooms was thin and some mornings, she would hear him strike up a jolly, yodelling whistle. He'd quite the singing voice by all accounts and there was bound to be singing today. Church camp always involved singing.

Nora clambered in last of all, and once everyone's belts were fastened, the minibus grumbled into life. The driver said something unintelligible – a foreign chap, probably one of those Eastern Europeans – Sybil couldn't get a good look at him. She saw only the anonymous back of his head, a thick crease at the base of his skull that brought to mind sausage meat.

The tyres on the shale made a sound like crackling flames. From her window seat, Sybil watched the great pale face of Earlsdon Park receding, its fountain small enough to fit between her thumb and forefinger, its chimneys mere match sticks against the enormity of the sky. Rafts of cloud drifted layer upon layer and somewhere far above, distant and unseen, lay the sun.

The minibus entered a corridor of oak trees and the light grew dim. It made Sybil think of the time she'd made the children play clothes from a pair of old curtains and watched them clamber up into these very trees. She'd been a governess. But no, that wasn't quite right. The memory of it was like a soap bubble drifting just beyond her fingertips. She reached for the thought and it was gone.

Someone was breathing over her, a wet sort of wheeze that moistened the side of her face. She kept her eyes on the window, retrieved the handkerchief she'd tucked into

her sleeve and used it to dab at her cheek. Mother had warned her about such men. Best not make a fuss – Nora might change her mind and insist that Sybil return to her cell. His hand now, on her thigh, a squeeze just above the knee. She whirled round to face him. It was the chap who'd tipped his hat at her in the entrance hall – a sickly old beast with sheep teeth and eyes cramped in a perpetual squint.

“I'd thank you to keep your hands to yourself,” she said.

“Feisty! I like that in a girl,” he said with a laugh and then, with quiet menace, “there's a word for girls like you.”

“Yes there is,” said Sybil, “I believe the word is *married*.”

And she held up her wedding band with triumph; it was the greatest achievement of her life.

#

Six days before her wedding, Sybil came out in hives. For weeks, a slow, crawling fear had dimmed the joy of her wedding preparations. She couldn't sleep – the threat of her wedding night hung over her bed like the sword of Damocles. A girl's virginity was her greatest asset – Mother always said so – and the thought of relinquishing it now, felt like a kind of self-murder. All through their intense courtship, Sybil had repelled Clive's advances with a vehemence that drove him wild. He'd had to relieve himself with the likes of Gina Lewes from *The Feathers*. It didn't count as cheating, Clive said, because Gina was the local bike – everyone had had a ride on her. At any rate, once they were married, Clive would have no need for Gina or any other woman. Sybil would be enough for him.

But what if she wasn't?

Peace of mind cost seven pound fifty at a discreet bookshop on The Old Kent road. The title was not one that Mr Alderton was likely to stock in Roedale's Book Emporium and to order it especially would have been unthinkable. The dust jacket featured a man and a woman in a naked embrace and above them, in a typeface bold as brass: *The Joy of Sex: A gourmet Guide to Love Making, by Dr Alexander Comfort.*

It was Tina who turned Sybil on to it. She'd been in the refectory one lunchtime with some of the other girls from the typing pool, talking in hushed tones and giggles as they pored over the book. While Sybil waited in line for a podgy serving of tapioca, tantalizing phrases wafted towards her: 'a sensual appetizer,' a 'ménage à trois'. At first she thought it must be some kind of cooking manual. She peered over Tina's shoulder to see what all the fuss was about and had quite a shock when she was confronted by a shaggy mons pubis.

"I don't think that is appropriate reading material for the cafeteria," she said, "and if I see it again, I shall have to confiscate it."

Tina smiled, her false eyelashes batting in mock innocence.

"If you'd like to borrow the book Sybil, you only have to ask."

Sybil kept her own copy at home in the kitchen. She wrapped the smutty cover in brown paper and stuffed it on the top shelf, between Mrs Beeton and Elizabeth David. Mother hadn't ventured up there since Sybil made her first Sunday roast, at the age of twelve. In the evenings, while Mother was watching *Crossroads*, Sybil would retreat to the kitchen to 'plan her menus' for according to Dr Comfort, "*Nobody wants a seven-course meal every time.*"

As with any recipe book, some dishes sounded more palatable than others. Her fingers turned the page entitled 'oral' with the same revulsion with which she handled offal. She was obliged, at least once a month, to indulge Mother's penchant for a stuffed

lamb's heart. The trick was to focus not on the slippery meat, but on the mechanics of its preparation. Sybil found that if she followed the recipe with precision, concentrating carefully on the trussing, she could quite forget the stench of raw flesh.

"Chef-grade cooking doesn't happen naturally..." Dr Comfort assured her. *"It's hard to make mayonnaise by trial and error... Cordon Bleu sex, as we define it, is exactly the same situation."*

Now this was a language that Sybil could understand; she was a dab hand at making mayonnaise.

She ought to have burned that vile book when Clive told her to. Instead, Sybil had bundled it up in an old dress, tucked it away at the back of her wardrobe, a guilty secret waiting to be unwrapped. Sybil's weakness was Emma's corruption.

She'd been carrying the washing up to the airing cupboard when she heard a peculiar noise. She stood on the landing, her hand poised on the brass handle of the bedroom door. She listened, shoulders tensed, cheek pressed against an arc of ballerinas whose contortions spelled out EMMA. Pushing her bare arm against the glossy wood, Sybil forced the door open. The carpet made a sound like tearing fabric.

Emma: alone on her bed, her fingers between her legs and in front of her, spread wide on the rosebud bedspread, *The Joy of Sex: A gourmet Guide to Love Making*.

She knew then that she had infected her daughter with the same loathsome concupiscence that had, on their wedding night, made Clive recoil in disgust.

"You tricked me – made me wait – when all the time, you were damaged goods."

Yr Hafan, 1995.

Hawys finds it folded up at the back of the airing cupboard, a labour of love, buried under blankets. It took her a week to sew it – a banner of white and green, three metres long. Appliquéd in blazing red are the words, 'Nid yw Cymru ar Werth'. *Wales is not for Sale*. Hawys tucks it away again, no shame in what it stands for, only horror at what it cost her.

At the fag end of their marriage, it didn't take much to get Roger roiling mad. But if there was one thing he hated more than everything else, it was Hawys's friends from Cymdeithas yr Iaith, the *Welsh Language Society*. He called them the 'nashies' – a word that curled off his lips like an insult.

"Why should nationalist be a dirty word?" she asked him. "Aren't you a nationalist yourself?" But there was a distinction in Roger's mind. His nationalism was proudly British. Hers was stubbornly Welsh.

Every Thursday she'd meet her friends in the vestry of their chapel to talk about the next protest, campaigning for a new Property Act. Little Alys would trundle along with her mother, a colouring book under her arm. She'd sneak custard creams from the communal tin while the adults talked and smoked and made angry speeches. Hawys had seen first hand the effects of English migration; the yuppies and hippies, the retirees with their fat wallets, pushing out the local Welsh-speaking communities. Young people who might have stayed on and worked in the local businesses, could no longer afford to live in their own villages. Hawys had hopes for Alys: a university degree, a career, the chance to see the world, but always a home to return to, always the roots of her ancestry, the language of her people. It was Alys's birthright and Hawys would defend it till the last.

While Roger was chasing deals, goodness-knows-where, Hawys travelled up to Cardiff with Alys in tow, to demonstrate outside the council offices. Roger was livid when he found out. He chased her across the field to Yr Hafan, where Hawys always took refuge.

They were sitting in the kitchen, the air dense with the scent of cawl. Steam rose from tea towels drying on the aga and condensed on the small square windows of the farmhouse. While the adults argued, Siôn and Alys sat on the deep windowsill, taking turns to dip a fingertip into the mist, carving out their names on the wet glass.

"You agree don't you Idris?" said Roger. "She's a mother. She's got responsibilities."

Gwen cut in before Idris had a chance to reply.

"So she should just stay at home and shut her mouth, should she?"

Roger stared at a knot in the woodwork, pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. He looked up and smiled – a crocodile smile, too many teeth.

"If you want to go gallivanting about on your crusades then don't have children. You can't have it both ways."

"Oh really? You seem to," said Hawys.

"Me? I'm sweating to put a roof over our heads!"

Gwen scoffed at that.

"The cottage belongs to Hawys."

Chair screeching, Roger leapt to his feet, red in the face, forefinger jabbing in the air towards Alys.

"Look at that! That just proves my point!"

Alys had traced a shape in the condensation: a curl like a flame, rising up into an arrow point. Tafod y ddraig – the dragon's tongue – the emblem of the Welsh Language Society.

"You're brainwashing my girl! It's a cult!"

Hawys rolled her eyes, stifling a laugh but Gwen was not amused. She planted her fists on the tabletop and glared at Roger, her voice trembling through her teeth.

"How dare you! You're talking about our language – our culture – and it's been here a damned sight longer than you."

Roger brought his fist down on the table, setting the crockery chattering.

"Idris. Can't you talk some sense into your woman?"

Idris shrugged, tried to make light of it all with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm keeping out of this," he said.

Hawys hated him for that; he never stood up to Roger. He never stood up for anything. He looked the other way, even as Roger loomed over Hawys and said with a vicious twist of his lips,

"If you carry on with this nashy bullshit, you're going to wake up one morning alone. I'll take Alys back to England with me. You'll never see her again."

Hawys puts the banner back in its place, packs the loose folds tightly into the farthest corner of the cupboard. Her fingers skim something cool and smooth, a wooden box that once belonged to her mother. She traces the slit of its lid with her fingertip. It lifts a little, enough to slot her hand inside, to feel the dry paper inside. She shouldn't take it out and yet she cannot help herself. She draws her hand out from between the sheets and blankets, pulls out a flimsy fold of newspaper. The beating of her heart chases

tremors down her arm, her fingers tremble as she holds the cutting, barely daring to read the words.

“Hawys?”

It’s Alys, calling to her from downstairs. Hawys folds the cutting away, slips it back into the hidden box and reburies the box under blankets, sheets and towels. She closes the door on the cupboard.

“Ie cariad? Beth yw e?” she says. *What is it love?*

Alys emerges from the shadows of the stairwell and says,

“Fi mynd i fferm.”

Hawys pauses to drink in these lovely, misshapen words. *I go to farm*. Pride swells within her; the language is taking root, fragile, imperfect but alive. Hawys smiles, says she’ll be along later, tells Alys to take care on her bike. The girl’s head bobs back down the stairs and Hawys stands with her back to the door of the airing cupboard. She listens to the click of the front door in its frame, the reel of wheels on the garden path and wonders at the hand God has dealt her, how long this blissful moment will last.

#

The girl closes the red front door and picks up her bike from the porch. She runs a finger through pebbles of water that have collected on its cool steel frame. The bike is hers now. She’s got used to its clunking gears and hard narrow seat. Her body has adjusted to fit its shape. She walks the bike down the garden path, spokes clacking over the sounds from the gulch, as the stream turns over and over again. She pauses by the gate, bends her head around the corner of the hen coop to see if there are eggs. Nothing yet. Her favourite hen struts out from behind the low stone wall. Blodyn is white and dappled grey, her wings a pinkish buff. The girl never knew that chickens could be so pretty.

“Dim byd,” she says, latching the gate. “I’m sorry I don’t have anything for you.” As she mounts her bike, she wonders what Kate would think if she could see her now, talking to a chicken. She pushes the thought from her mind. She’d like to take all her unwanted memories and bundle them off a cliff, see them dashed against the rocks below.

Shoving down the heel of her boot, she builds pace on the bike and looks up into the dewy morning. Her lungs fill with air as cold as the stream, eddying scents she cannot name. A breeze shudders over the fields, combing channels into the pasture. The season is leaching colour, fields and thicket dimmed to sludge and slate, making the winter blooms shine all the brighter. The shrubbery is studded with small white starbursts. Tiny yellow flowers spurt from the hedgerow, their sprays wreathed in spiny leaves. She turns her face up to the milky winter sun and thinks, *I never want to leave this place.*

She has planned what she will say to Idris, how she will speak to Siôn. They will protest, of course, but if she has to, she will run. Nothing will drag her back to Roedale. Nothing.

Anger spikes through her muscles and she pushes herself harder up the hill towards the pear tree, sweat trickling at her temples as she crests the peak, breathing hard until the land evens out and the pedalling gets easier.

Siôn and Idris are out in the yard. She sees them before they see her, freewheeling down the sloping field, the wind in her ears, cold marbling her face. Idris stands astride a ewe, his hands patting down her flanks, feeling for something good or bad, the girl doesn’t know. What she does know is that the sheep are called Balwen. She remembers because Idris made a joke of it when she asked why they weren’t white.

“We’re all black sheep in this family,” he’d said. She liked that.

He seemed to like her interest in the farm.

“They’re named ‘Balwen’ for the blaze of white on their nose,” he’d said, “They may look funny to you but these girls are indigenous to the Tywi valley. Hardy, though they’re rare. Perhaps that’s why I like them so much.”

Balwen: she mouths the word as she sails down through the field, her hair flickering behind her like a flame. Something gives her away; perhaps the buzz of her wheels, or the bleating of sheep as she whistles past. The men look up. She sees their lips moving, their backs straightening and she raises her chin in defiance, a warrior, going in to battle.

Parking her bike against the fence post, she steps over the stile and strides into the yard. Idris shields his eyes from the brightness.

“Bore da,” he says, his voice halting where he might have used her name.

She greets him in Welsh before turning to English to say, “I’ve decided to move on.”

The words hit Idris’s chest like shots. She sees their impact in the slump of his shoulders, the slackening of his jaw. He turns his face away, his brow knotted with lines. It is Siôn who speaks next.

“Alys – Emma – I don’t know what to call you.” A small, hesitant laugh before he continues, “Where are you going to go?”

The girl stands there, squeezing her fists, all her defiance turning to mulch. Sadness surges up from the pit of her, an ugly sound, half gasp, half yodel.

“I don’t know,” she says.

She cannot stop the tears coming; their heat scalds her cold cheeks.

“Dere ma,” says Idris, *come here*, and he folds her to his chest, his hand on the back of her skull, his lips pressed to the crown of her head. The girl wraps her arms around his waist, sadness shaking out of her, in long, trembling sobs.

“Dere di, dere da, dere di,” Idris murmurs into her hair. *There, there.*

#

“I wanted to die,” she says. “I was eleven and I wanted to die.”

With nothing left to lose, the girl lays out her truth on the kitchen table, and the unburdening is an aching relief.

“I took myself down to Roedale Park. There’s a pond there and I’d read about this writer who put rocks in her pockets so I did that and it almost worked.”

As her words shape the story, her mind reaches back into the dark, a memory developing from the negative, its colours as bright as the day it was made. She can almost feel the suck of water, grit underfoot, pondweed tickling her cheek and the cold, creeping like glassy fingers. She steps off the ridge. A gulping sound as her hood fills with water and darkness swallows her whole. Heavy, drifting out of time and space, she wills her own erasure, numbing her to nothing, toe by icy toe.

Voices above the surface, muffled and muted, the slush of churning water. Something takes hold of her, irresistible, heaving her dead weight up and up until her face breaks the surface of the water and sound returns. Thundering sheets of water, voices, shrill shouting.

She opens her eyes to a sky the pristine white of a new page. She thinks it might be heaven and perhaps it is, for there is an angel hovering above her, his face shining in a frame of light. His smile promises her that everything is going to be okay. From now on, nothing will ever hurt her again.

When the girl looks up, Siôn is leaning across the table towards her, his face open and inquisitive while Idris leans back in his chair. He wipes a hand over his forehead, takes a furtive glance at his watch. It isn't personal. After weeks of watching and listening, she has learned this about him: he does not like to rake through emotions, especially when there are jobs to be getting on with.

"Terrence Timson?" says Siôn.

The girl nods. "My guardian angel."

Idris blows out his cheeks, rocks back on his chair.

"He saved me," the girl says.

Siôn stares at her, disbelieving. "He almost killed you."

The girl inspects her hands, presses her thumb against the white spots on her fingernails. Idris has been quiet until now. He takes a deep breath, leans forward in his chair, his legs spread wide.

"None of this changes anything," he says, "You have a mother and a father who must be worried sick. I have a responsibility to let them know that you're safe, that you're –

"They know."

"What?"

"I called home, the night I left. Spoke to my dad. I told him everything... how me and Terry had been planning it for ages. We were going to make it look like I'd committed suicide, then start a new life in Ireland. Terry had already found us a flat. He was going to travel back and forth to Roedale for a bit, to make sure no one got suspicious. Anyway... I changed my mind. We were at a petrol station and when Terry got out of the car to pay, I snuck over to the phone box, reversed the charges on the call. I told Dad I'd made a terrible mistake, I begged him to come and get me."

She breaks off, scrunches her fingers into fists.

“Well?” says Siôn, “What did he say?”

“Nothing at first. I thought there was a fault on the line or something but then he did speak, and his voice was weird, all tight and distant. He said my friend’s mum, Clementine, had been round, spouting off about a piece of writing I sent her... a sort of memoir. That was part of my plan too, you see? A kind of suicide note. So anyway, Dad didn’t say anything. He just struck a match right next to the phone. I could hear a sort of whooshing sound and then he hung up.”

Silence rings around the cold stone walls of the kitchen, nothing bouncing back to nothing. Siôn glances at Idris but his eyes are set on the window, the sky beyond, swollen with rainclouds. The facts filter down slowly, settling onto the surface of their world like dust or flakes of ash.

It is Siôn who breaks the silence.

“So all he’d have to do, is tell the police that you were with Terry and they could come here, they would figure it out. It would be easy.”

“He’s not going to tell them.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because he knows that if they find me, I’ll tell them why I did it.”

Siôn blunders on. “Why *did* you do it?”

The girl flushes; shame pinching her neck, her face, reddening her to the scalp. Siôn opens his mouth to ask the question again but Idris places a hand on his arm, blinks long and slow, his lips pursed in a silent ‘Shh’.

Rain begins pattering the panes.

“I love it here,” the girl says.

Idris reaches his hand across the table to her, rests his thick rough fingers on the back of her hand. His nails are ridged like clamshells, outlined in black like river silt.

“What about Alys?” says Siôn, “I mean, the real Alys?”

The girl sniffs, wipes her cheek with the back of her hand.

“Maybe she’s happy in England,” she says.

Siôn sees something flit across his father’s face.

“Let’s deal with that problem if and when it arises,” says Idris.

It’s the smallest of tremors and though he blinks it away as if it is nothing, still, it unsettles Siôn. He wonders what Idris knows.

“And Aunty Hawys?” says Siôn.

“Why break her heart all over again?” the girl says.

Slowly, reluctantly, the men nod and with this small gesture of acquiescence, a lightness spreads through the room; the girl smiles as she feels it unfolding like a gift unwrapped.

“So you’ll destroy those photocopies?” she asks Siôn.

His lips make a thin line, and though his expression is troubled, he dips his head in agreement. The girl swallows hard, barely daring to believe what is happening, that she might just get what she wants.

“From now on,” she says, but the end of her sentence has not yet formed itself. Her mind swipes around for words, they seem to swim before her, little fishes she must catch with her bare hands.

Name my is my enw fi yw.

She shuffles them about, strings them to a line, casts it out to sea.

“Enw fi yw Alys,” she says. *From now on, my name is Alys.*

Roedale, 2015.

Down in the den, Kate's laptop came to life with an angelic hum. She ought to go back to bed. Bobby would wake for a feed soon, and what was it the baby guru said? *Sleep when the baby sleeps*. The baby guru could fuck off.

Kate pulled the tartan throw off the sofa and made it into a shawl. The central heating had gone off and a gentle patter of rain had started up outside, the smell of it faintly metallic through the air vent.

Her hands hovered over the keyboard of her laptop; she wouldn't make a ceremony of it, but like a secret eater, plunge in. She logged onto the Reddit webpage and waited for the page to load. The internet connection was slow down here. There was still time to change her mind. Instead, she lay her head back on the sofa's tight headrest, and waited, listening to the house contracting and expanding, alive, breathing.

Dr Chundra had warned her about this: the hours she'd wasted late night googling, fishing the web for traces of Emma. It was unhealthy and unproductive and it only made Kate's anxiety worse. Her heart shrivelled in her chest when she thought of the last conversation they'd had about it.

"Why do *you* think you're so fixated on this childhood friendship?" Dr Chundra had asked.

"I feel guilty that I didn't do more to help her."

A line had appeared between Dr Chundra's eyebrows. "Do you think it could be something other than guilt? Anger perhaps?"

Kate had let out a strange snort of a laugh.

"Why should I be angry at Emma?"

Dr Chundra had stared at the shreds of a tissue Kate had been absent-mindedly twisting and tearing for the last ten minutes.

“You tell me.”

Anger was not an emotion Kate chose to endure. She preferred pity. If she could pity Emma, Kate could retain her dignity. If Emma was a victim then she couldn't be blamed for running away, for failing to help Kate. She was only fifteen after all – a child.

The webpage loaded: a Reddit group entitled, *Unresolved Mysteries*. Emma Granger had her own thread. There were the usual anodyne comments: *How awful. Her poor parents. So sad.*

Kate skipped over these remarks and moved onto the theories: *She committed suicide. She ran away. The body in the park is proof at last that she was murdered!* The more outlandish ideas were at least interesting: *Burial in the park suggests a pagan ritual. She was probably sacrificed by a cult. The body in the park is actually Emma Granger's victim. She escaped justice by having gender reassignment surgery. She now lives locally as a man.*

There had been nothing new for a week or more. Kate scanned down the posts until she came to her own. The muscles of her spine tightened as she read the words she'd typed only a few days before:

*I BELIEVE THAT TERRY TIMSON WAS NOT THE HERO EVERYONE BELIEVES HIM TO BE. I BELIEVE HE MURDERED EMMA GRANGER. IF ANYONE KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT EMMA OR TERRY, PLEASE CONTACT ME AT THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS:
JUSTICEFOREMMA@GOOGLEMAIL.COM*

The heavy thud of her heart in her chest, a roll of nausea in her stomach as she scrolled down and read the comments.

LadyGodiva: Terry Timson was a fucking hero! Taught me drama for years. I'd never have found the confidence to be myself if it wasn't for that man. Dumbest theory ever. Probably slander too.

Kate took a breath. She had prepared herself for this kind of comment. She was tempted to write back, *Technically, it's libel*, but she resisted the urge. *Do not engage. Merely observe.* Kate could create Dr Chundra's voice in her own head by now. She could make her say all sorts of things. It probably wasn't healthy.

Five more minutes and she'd go to bed. She scrolled down again.

Jonny120: What's the point in accusing a dead man? Even if UR right... then what? Waste of time to pursue this.

There were no other messages. She felt her chest deflating. Perhaps there'd be something in her new e-mail account. She logged in to 'Justice for Emma' and wondered if this was what gamblers felt: the painful thrill of secrecy, the compulsion to pursue danger. Her inbox was empty.

Five minutes had been and gone. Sparrows scuttled in the eaves outside, a lone blackbird fluted the threat of morning. She felt it looming like the end of an exam: *Please finish the sentence you are writing then put your papers down.* There had to be something: a clue, a thread, anything that might connect her to the past, anything that

might explain the nagging feeling she had that there was more to Emma's story than The End. Her laptop pinged. Someone had uploaded a new message on the notice board.

Beatrice79: Maybe your friend doesn't want to be found. The best way to honour her life is to live your life to the full.

Kate slammed the laptop closed, looked up at the little window and saw a distorted self in its mirror. She looked old and tired. Pressing her palms against her cheeks, she tugged the skin back and caught a glimpse of the girl she'd once been. It didn't take much, no more than a nudge, for her mind to take her back to *the night of*.

#

It was Friday night and Kate was getting ready. She was wearing her new tartan dress, black tights and thick-wedged sandals, black eyeliner and coral lipstick. She'd used up Clementine's hairspray trying to get big hair and was pleased with the result. She could definitely pass for eighteen.

Kate told Clementine that she was going to the cinema with Emma. In fact, she was headed to the Red Lion pub where *The Zeitgeist* were playing. She was ten minutes late to meet Naomi and Cassie. They must have assumed she wasn't coming for they'd gone on ahead. When Kate arrived at the door of the pub, flushed and breathless from running, the bouncer took one look at her baby face and laughed.

"Go home little girl," he said.

"But all my friends are inside."

"Is that so? Well point them out to me and I'll chuck them out as well."

She had no choice but to walk away. She could go home of course but that would be a waste of the lie she'd told. She could go round to Luke's but she wasn't sure how

she felt about him since their disastrous attempt at sex the night before. No, Luke's place was not an option.

Kate walked down Rope Street, headed for home. The council offices reared up before her, foreboding in their grandeur. They'd been part of a country estate once, encompassing the park and the manor house beyond. Emma claimed to be related to the historical owners.

"My three greats grandmother was a chamber maid there," she had once said, "raped by the Baron. So you see I have blue blood, just a little tainted."

Clementine had laughed and said, "What a wonderful story-teller you are."

Kate curled her lip at the memory. Emma was always telling 'stories' and Clementine was always indulging her. Kate resented the way her parents treated Emma as if she were a member of the family instead of an irritating friend whom Kate was fast outgrowing.

Most Thursdays, after drama club, Emma would come back to Kate's house for tea. She'd laugh at Art's stupid jokes and get into deep conversations with Clementine about authors that Kate hadn't read. Clementine made sure there was always a bottle of Sunny Delight in the fridge – Emma's favourite. She'd quiz Emma on whatever she'd been reading: what did she think of the characters, the language, the style of narration? She'd listen to Emma's thoughts with her head cocked on one side and say, "interesting," from time to time. Then Frankie or Ollie would start squalling and Clementine would charge off to investigate, a half-ironed shirt over her arm, or a wet paintbrush stuck in the crow's nest of her hair, forever multi-tasking. And Emma would look annoyed, as if it were she who deserved Clementine's time; as if she were her real daughter and everyone else was an imposter.

The straight rope of road fanned out into three paths. It was too dark to go via the park, so Kate took the fork that led past the bus station and up beyond the church hall. It was quiet for a Saturday night, she could hear the buzz of street lamps overhead, the scrape of her heels on the tarmac. A yew hedge lined the terraced row. She bounced her palm off its dense prickles, wondering what the plump red berries might taste like.

A light in the distance caught her attention; the church hall glowed. There might have been an aerobics class in there, or a meeting of the Embroiderer's Guild but as she drew closer, it seemed too quiet. A car was parked outside on the curb, a white Ford Escort with a little fin sticking out above the boot. Kate's fingers tingled with excitement. She knew that car; it belonged to her drama teacher, Terry. Perhaps he'd offer her a lift home. Emma would be so jealous when she told her!

Terry Timson was *diet coke*. Okay, he was kind of old but he didn't act like it. He wore fashionable clothes and his hair in bouncy curtains, like Robbie from Take That. Everyone said he could have been a professional actor but he gave it all up to help young people fulfil their potential. When he spoke to you, he had a way of making you feel that you were the most interesting person in the room. He told Kate he could get her into the BRIT school if she wanted; that she had something special. All Kate had to do was say the word, and he would take her on as a private pupil, coach her for the audition – he would take her up to London himself. Clementine said that was all very well but Kate was only fifteen and she was getting a perfectly good education in Roedale thank you very much.

Kate hung on the rusted railing outside the hall, her fingers sweating on the gritty metal, a weightless sensation in her legs. The door of the hall was ajar, a faint drift of music escaped: it was that song her mum liked, *Lifted*. She stood motionless, her chest swollen with breath. What to do? She could pop her head round the door and say

hello. She'd act casual of course, say that she was just coming back from the pub – left early 'cause the band was crap.

Her courage failed her. She stepped away from the railing and turned to carry on up the hill. Then she heard Terry's voice.

"Is that you?"

Swivelling on her heel, she turned to face him.

"Hi."

He looked surprised, as if he'd been expecting someone else. He was wearing jeans, a red checked shirt and a pair of yellow Timberlands. Very cool.

"Kate. What are you doing here?"

"Just passing. I saw the light..."

"Oh."

He looked up and down the road, chewing the inside of his cheek.

"Waiting for someone?" said Kate.

"I've been stood up."

"You?"

He smiled at her.

"I appreciate your incredulity that such a thing is possible but yes."

She felt him notice her outfit, her make up, her hair.

"Wanna keep me company for a minute?" he said.

She shrugged.

"Okay."

#

It's strange to be inside the church hall on a Saturday night – the stage bare, the parquet floor empty – like being inside a wooden box. Plastic chairs are stacked along the right hand wall as far as the piano. Tucked into the lip of the window shelf above, a small stereo rattles out local radio. A ply-board partition at the back of the hall marks off a narrow kitchen; this is where Terry heads now. Kate wonders if she should follow. No, she must appear cool, calm, sophisticated.

She wanders towards the stage, picks up a discarded copy of Production Casting Report from the floor. Someone has circled an advert for 'Big T Productions: young models wanted.' Without knowing where to tidy the paper away, she places it neatly on the corner of the stage. There are still a few remnants from *My Fair Lady* stuffed in the wings: Eliza's cart, a gramophone from Henry Higgins' study and a stuffed barn owl under a glass dome. She slides it onto the stage and peers inside. The face is a creamy heart fringed with gold. The eyes are plastic but the beak looks real, yellow and curved like an old toenail.

"Gross," she says.

She hears Terry's footsteps behind her.

"I think she's rather lovely," he says, and when she turns to face him, he hands her a can of lager. She is startled, a little thrilled he is treating her like an adult. She hopes that Stella tastes like Cider.

"What's wrong with dear old Olga?" says Terry.

"Olga?"

"Olga the Owl."

Kate shrugs. She doesn't want to hurt his feelings. She gazes around, looking for a change of subject. There are three bags slumped against the wall: a rucksack, a green canvas tent bag, and a leather hold all, the kind her parents take on weekend breaks.

“You going away somewhere?” she asks, popping open her can. Lager dribbles over her fingers and she licks at the froth, pretends that she likes its sour tang.

“I’m supposed to be,” says Terry.

He takes a long cold gulp from his can then kicks the tent bag, hard.

“Fuck!”

He is hopping on one leg now, wincing with pain. Kate puts down her drink and steps towards him, uncertain what to say, how to behave.

“Are you okay?” she says.

Terry doesn’t reply. Kate nibbles the skin around her thumb nail. She shouldn’t be here, intruding on this private crisis.

“I ought to go,” she says.

Terry half laughs, running a hand through his hair. He looks older in this light, his face draped in shadows. Kate feels the first flickering of fear. She cannot name what she senses, a subtle shift of mood, something swirling beyond the reach of her understanding.

“You think I’m pathetic,” says Terry.

“I don’t.”

“Then come over here and give me a hug.”

She swallows. Isn’t this what she’s always fantasised? She steps towards him, close enough now to see the hairs coiling up from his collar, to read *Burton* on the buttons of his shirt. Her mind conjures flashes from the night before: Luke’s bony torso, the skin of his cheek, as soft as her own. As Terry’s arms fold around her, she can scarcely believe what is happening. She feels his breath on her lips. It is inconceivable; she is kissing Terry Timson.

Her mind gallops ahead. Is she going to be Terry's girlfriend? She ought to break up with Luke first. Kate pulls her mouth gently back to say so, but Terry pursues her. He moves with authority, pressing her against the wall, his hands on her wrists, just like in the movies. It is intoxicating. He is a grown man and he wants her. She can feel the hardness of him against her stomach, the heat of it. She is losing her footing, swept along on a current she cannot fight and the thrill of it makes her want to laugh.

Terry breaks off with a jolt. He holds her face in his hand, his thumb pressed in the groove under her jaw.

"Are you laughing at me?" he says.

She cannot read his expression.

"No," says Kate but she's smiling and he doesn't like it.

"You are. You're fucking laughing at me."

She has never been sworn at by an adult; it's shocking. Fear licks through her.

"I bet you and Emma do it all the time... have a good laugh at my expense."

Out of her depth, she cannot process what is happening – why is he suddenly talking about Emma?

His hand tightens on her jaw.

"Bitch."

"I wasn't laughing at you, honestly," says Kate but it is too late, she has upset him and she cannot understand how.

Terry lets go of her face but he does not move away. His chest is pressed against her body, his hands inside her dress, grasping at the gusset of her tights.

"Please, Terry. I'm sorry –"

His face is grim, his jaw taut.

The slow gathering burn Kate felt just moments before, is gone. Fear bristles her skin. She hears her tights rip, feels Terry's fingers fishing around inside.

"Please don't," she says but he doesn't respond. There is a detached stillness to his face, he seems to look straight through her.

"Please – "

Kate's cheeks are shaking, tears burning behind her eyes.

"Stop!"

He takes his hand out of her knickers but he is angry. He slaps his palm over Kate's mouth and looks over his shoulder at the door.

"Shut up!"

He moves quickly now, bearing down on her with the weight of his body, so that her legs buckle and she slumps to the floor. She flounders, tries to get up but he is on top of her now, the full weight of him crushing her spine against the hard wooden floor.

"Don't tell me this isn't what you want," he says, "Staring up at me with those puppy eyes. You've been gagging for it since you were eleven years old."

She feels a deep ache of shame in her chest.

He grinds against her, snagging a whorl of her pubic hair and when she flinches, he gets a hand between her thighs. His fingers pry her apart, she hears his zip and though she cannot see it, she can feel his *thing*, blindly pushing at the hollow of her hip, shoving at the seam of her skin.

"No. No. No."

But it is too late. She hadn't understood the inevitability of it. She hadn't understood. The pressure against her skin is unbearable, she draws a short sharp breath. It is not what she thought it would be. This deep, excruciating stretch cannot be right. It does not fit. Her flesh strains, she feels it tearing, pain rippling up and out,

prickling her scalp, scattering goosebumps over her skin. Vomit stings the back of her throat. As if pain might push her out of her body, for a moment she drifts out of herself. It drags her back, a stab that runs her through, burning inside, all the way to the tip of her spine.

And it is in this moment that she becomes aware of another presence. Someone is standing in the doorway of the church hall. Kate knows the shape of her frame, the swish of her hair as she turns and runs: Emma.

Yr Hafan, March 1996.

Alys is making her way down through the paddock. The last of the snow is scattered in sugary heaps across the fields and frost dusts the tops of the low stone walls. Alys has spent the morning poring over poems with Hawys and now she is hungry for fresh air and sunshine. The cool air soothes her throbbing forehead – growing pains, Hawys says, the pain of a language taking root.

As March gusts around the hillside, Alys tugs up the collar of Gwen's old wax jacket and steps down into the lower field. She is wearing a faded pair of blue overalls; they'd swamped her when she'd first tried them on but Hawys's love comes wrapped in flaky pastry and teisen lap, lashings of fresh cream from the neighbouring farm. Five months since her arrival, Alys is beginning to *llenwi ei chroen* – to fill her skin, and as she grows to fill the loose folds of her borrowed clothes, she feels a little closer to herself, to the person she would like to be.

Fallow all winter, the field is sprinkled with spring flowers. She treads through shin-high grass, polishing her boots with dew. A pair of yellow butterflies weaves a double helix through the spring air. 'Pili pala', she says to herself. *Butterfly*. She has a hoard of words by now, lenses to hold up to the world and when she peers through them, the world looks different, fresh-painted.

Snowdrops bow their heads in the long grass. She learned their name from a poem – *eirlyisiau* – and she sees now what the poet saw – white tassels, upended cups, milk teeth. The book was a Christmas gift from Hawys: *Eucalyptus* by Menna Elfyn. Alys likes that the poems are laid out side-by-side, Welsh and English on facing pages, the spine between them, like a bridge between worlds.

She has been studying hard all winter, feeding the seed inside her. For months she had nothing much to show but tremors in the tith. Deep and unseen, roots must have been unfurling, branching out in lacy webs, for now spring is here, she can make whole sentences. Language emerges from her in glistening shoots, hope-swollen, as tough as it is fragile.

There is something else too, delicate and unnamed, growing between she and Siôn. In quiet moments, he catches her gaze, flares his eyes at her to make her laugh. It is a small thing, she doesn't even know what it means but she knows it is meant for her. A language of eyes; a language with only two speakers. There was a moment too, guiding the flock down from the top field. She, with her smallest fingers wedged into the corners of her smile, he with his head thrown back in laughter.

"I give up," she said, "I cannot whistle."

And as her hand dropped from her mouth, Siôn caught it in his own, kissed her whistle-less fingers.

When the girl looks up, she has almost reached Yr Hafan. Its creamy walls and sagging roof make her think of a pat of butter melting in the sun. The air is webbed with scents that are familiar to Alys now: the tang of fresh rain and slurry, sweetened with a note of knapweed. Lamb bleats carry across the hillside, their high vibrato stirring a feeling in her belly, like stepping into mid air.

Hawys has gone back to bed and Siôn has gone in to college but Alys knows where to find Idris. He has been out in the barn all night. She quickens her pace, skips towards the barn, wondering how many lambs came in the night.

The barn is a vast, crude construction of breeze-blocks and corrugated metal, bisected by a concrete corridor. At the back is a large pen, pregnant with pacing ewes. Towards the front are crammed four or five smaller pens; snug bed-sits for new mothers and their fresh-sprung offspring. The air is dense with the stench of animal, alive with sound, a discordant choir of ewes and lambs.

She finds Idris in the large pen at the far end of the barn, his eye on a restless ewe. The animal has been circling but stands now in a corner, pawing the straw, trailing a dirty yellow balloon of fluid behind her.

“Bore da,” Alys says and Idris swivels to face her, smiling uneasily as he greets her good morning.

“What did I miss?” she asks, in her imperfect Welsh.

“Two,” he replies in Welsh, “only about twenty minutes after you went to bed last night.”

“Yffach,” she says and Idris chuckles to hear his own curses parroted back to him.

“Never mind *Alys fach*, you’ll have your chance now.”

The ewe lets out a deep throaty moan, her head arching back. Something shifts in the great bulk of her; there is a hollowing in her trunk, a gush of liquid from the yellow balloon.

“She’s going to need a hand,” says Idris.

He swings first one leg, then the other over the metal rail into the enclosure, then turns and holds out a hand to Alys. She hesitates for a moment, then places her fingers in the slab of his outstretched palm and steps over the fence into the pen.

Idris bends down to soothe the ewe, making little shushing sounds.

“Not squeamish are you Alys?” he says.

She nods and he laughs like a braying mule.

“There we are. Soon cure you of that.”

There is a plastic bottle strung up from a nail on the wall. He reaches it down and pumps a blob of disinfectant into her hands. While she scrubs at her fingers, he shows her how she might reach inside the ewe, what to feel for, how to pull. They are kneeling in the straw by the ewe’s hindquarters. The exhausted animal lies panting next to the flaccid amniotic sac.

“Right then,” says Idris, “You up to it?”

Alys thinks *no*, but nods *yes*.

The vulva is a huge pink aberration. She closes her fingers like he has shown her and pushes against the opening. Soft and slick and swallowing, the passageway admits her hand, wrist, fore arm. In a moment her fingertips graze the hard edge of a pair of shoes. As instructed, she loops her thumb and forefinger around one and gently tugs. Nothing. She pulls again, harder this time and the flesh begins to give a little. There is a slow, sliding, oozing of meat and bone and gristle and she can see the ewe’s belly contracting as she tugs. The other shoe slides up alongside the first until the pair pokes out into the world, poised like a diver. The head follows swiftly and in a sudden swoosh of liquid motion, the lamb sashes out onto the straw, calm and still and caked in mucous. A quiet elation sweeps through Alys’s body, lighting her up like a firefly.

“Da merch i,” Idris murmurs with satisfaction. *Good girl*. He scoops the mucous out of the lamb’s mouth with his fingers and hoicks it up by the ankles, placing it gently down beside its mother’s face where she welcomes it with a fuss of sniffs and licks. The little body lies inert as the ewe nudges at the bundle of limp limbs. Idris rubs its back sternly, slapping its flank, willing it into life but there is no spark.

“Yffach” he says angrily, “good size lamb too.”

Hoisting up the lifeless body, he slings the dead lamb over his shoulder, cloudy-eyed, grey tongue lolling. Then, he picks up the afterbirth and steps over the rail, striding off down the concrete corridor. Alys stares silently at the ewe, her senses ringing with the sting of failure. Eyes watering, chin trembling, she crouches motionless, fighting the instinct to run away. She draws a deep, pungent breath and climbs out of the pen.

She finds Idris a few pens up, frowning down at a lone ewe. The animal is sitting chewing, blandly indifferent while her lamb clammers pathetically at the divide between them.

“Why isn’t he in with his mother?” Alys asks.

“She doesn’t want to know,” Idris replies, “Won’t feed him. Sat on him.”

“Pam?” Alys asks. *Why?*

Idris shrugs.

“Some ewes don’t take to mothering,” he says. “Dim ots. *Never mind*. He’ll have a new mother now.”

He gestures for her to pick up the lamb, then stalks off towards the work room at the far end of the barn. Alys reaches in and gathers the lamb in her arms, cradling him tenderly, nuzzling his lovely spongy coat, buoyed up by the thrum of his heartbeat. She follows Idris into the workroom, which is little more than a division in the shed, fashioned with sheets of corrugated iron. There is a green metal cupboard full of provisions, a workbench and two stools. Sunlight spews in through a grimy window, casting spotted shadows across the rough concrete floor.

Idris slaps the corpse onto the workbench and rifles through a crate of dull metal farm utensils, pulling out a short, sharp hunting knife. Alys’s hand springs over her mouth, bile smarting in her throat as she watches Idris work.

He slides the blade under the skin at the top of the lamb's leg, running it down to the shoe in a swift line. There is not a drop of blood. He sinks his thumb into the cut and slides it straight down, separating the hide from the flesh. Once he has done all four legs, the rest comes away easily. Working swiftly and deftly with the knife, he tears the hide away with strong, clean yanks. Alys watches dumbly, her throat aching, as the dead lamb is reduced to meat. When Idris is finished, the carcass looks like a skinned hare, all glistening sinew and dark muscle.

The pelt in his fist, Idris nods at Alys to pass him the living lamb. She wraps her arms tighter around its springy little body, unwilling to give it up. He lets out a bark of a laugh.

"I'm not going to hurt him, *ferch*."

Reluctantly, she loosens her grip and Idris takes the lamb from her. It squirms in his huge hands, bucking and braying until he kneels down and mutters gruffly to it,

"Usst bach, dere di." *Hush little one, there, there.* "Though they go mad they shall be sane, Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again; Though lovers be lost love shall not..."

A memory tugs at the edges of Alys's mind – she knows that poem. She studied it once – *before*. How odd to hear it here, the words wrapped in these strange sounds, but then, no, these are the right sounds, she realises. Hers were the strange sounds.

The lamb calms a little, enough for Idris to clap the dead lamb's pelt around its quivering frame. It isn't a perfect fit, but he straps it on with twine, carefully wiping the slimy afterbirth over the joins, smearing mucous over the tail. When he is done, he ties the lamb's legs together and strides off back into the barn, dangling the lamb by its ankles.

Alys's ewe kicks sadly at the hay, bleating her grief into the din. Gently, Idris lowers the trussed lamb down into the pen, laying it close to the ewe's muzzle. He steps back and waits. Alys watches in bewilderment, her chest swelling, unwilling to release a breath. Cautiously, the ewe inspects the lamb, sniffing and snorting at his coat, her amber eyes madly raking him over. He bucks a little but is unable to get up on his tied feet. Cautiously, he lifts his muzzle in search of a teat and miraculously, begins to suckle. Alys looks at Idris's face and he smiles at her, the lines around his mouth bunching together like ripples on a lake. With a grunt of satisfaction, he leans in and unties the lamb's legs so that he can better attach himself to his new mother.

The deceived ewe feeds her lamb in contentment and Alys looks on, troubled and awed at the deception. It is, she thinks, the loveliest of lies. A sob shakes free from her chest and as if released from the silted depths of her mind, the last line of the poem swims up to the surface.

"And death shall have no dominion," she says.

Idris looks at her, his eyes small and bright behind the swags of his eyelids.

"Dere mlaen," he says, reaching out his hand to her. "Amser cinio." *Time for lunch.*

Together they tread down the hay-strewn concrete, out into the yard, and the blustery spring morning. Hugging the waxy edges of her jacket around her, Alys follows Idris towards Yr Hafan. She stares up at the scooping green fields into which she has been grafted and feels held within their fold, her feet planted deep in the rootstock, the possibilities of her life unfurling before her. She will write about this moment in years to come. She will see herself bathed in the buttery light of the past, a scion, offering her face up to the sun.

Roedale, 2015.

The minibus slowed to a crawl at the foot of Wayford Hill. Here, Sybil caught her first glimpse of the cathedral, huge and brutal on the top of the hill. Its tarmacked driveway spilled down the hill like a long black tongue and as the minibus moved along its length, Sybil had the sensation that she was being drawn, inexorably towards a monstrous mouth.

“I want to get out,” she said, tugging at the door handle of the minibus.

The thing was locked. She unclipped her seatbelt and rattled the door.

“I say, I want to get out now!” she said, loud enough to catch Nora’s attention.

“Hold your horses Sybil, the bus hasn’t stopped yet.”

When at last the minibus came to a halt, Nora called out from the front,

“Okay, everybody. Gather your belongings together. First stop, the Portaloos.”

The facilities consisted of a row of green plastic cubicles – unappealing to say the least – and since she was perfectly capable of deciding when she did or did not require the use of a lavatory, Sybil wandered off in the direction of the cathedral.

Up close, the building had a certain institutional familiarity. It might have been a boarding school or a training college, the kind of place where Sybil had been happy. She ran the heel of her palm along the exterior wall, dragging her fingers over the smooth red bricks, counting the prickly cement buffers between them. Forty-six stops and she came to three arched entrances, like punch holes in the wall. A phrase drifted into her mind: *My father’s house has many doors*. Or was it mansions? At any rate, she felt infused by a certainty that one of these archways would lead her where she needed to go and bowing under the second arc, she found herself in a bright corridor.

The air was thick with the faint remains of chrysanthemums. Clinging to the smooth line of the wall, she followed the sweet scent of decay all the way to the nave. No pews here; only rows of conference chairs, backed with embroidered hassocks and a handful of worshippers bent over in prayer. The walls were whitewashed, edged in blocky sandstone, the ceiling, a vaulted arc of yawning concrete. Arcades of arches framed the empty aisle and as she moved down its length, she was reminded of an endoscopy she'd once had; a tiny camera sent down the ridged corridor of her oesophagus in search of answers. There'd been scans and x-rays but the doctors could find nothing; just the tangled fist of her heart, bumping against her bones.

The doctor diagnosed stress.

"What have you got to be stressed about?" Clive had scoffed, "All you do is sit around the house all day, worshipping your inner goddess."

She'd almost protested, almost confessed to the recent incident at school. The Head Teacher, Mr Lenton, had called Sybil into his office to talk about a pernicious rumour Emma had started, concerning the maths teacher, Mr Morton. Sybil knew the Mortons from Sunday worship – a very respectable family, well-behaved children.

Mr Lenton folded his manicured hands on the green baize of his desk and peered at her through delicate spectacles.

"I shan't repeat Emma's story. Suffice to say, it was a vindictive response to Mr Morton's confiscation of a most inappropriate book that Emma had brought to school."

Mr Lenton placed the offensive item on the table between them. A single, muscled buttock peeped out between torn brown paper wrapping. Sybil recognised it instantly: *The Joy of Sex*. She blushed.

"I have no idea where Emma could have acquired –" she began, but Mr Lenton's voice was louder.

“I have no interest in where the book came from,” he said, “but I fully support Mr Morton in its confiscation and I will not have the good reputation of my staff members threatened with callous lies. There is a man’s career at stake here.”

The censorious tone of his voice made Sybil feel quite gauche.

“I do understand,” she replied, “and rest assured Mr Lenton, I shall be having stern words with my daughter.”

He gave Sybil a satisfied nod and straightened the silk handkerchief in his top pocket. Clive would describe this attention to sartorial detail as ‘poncey’ but Sybil found it rather winning. As Mr Lenton guided her towards the door, the thought of Clive caused Sybil to hesitate. If he got wind of any of this, he’d want to know exactly how Emma got her hands on that wretched book.

“I should be most obliged, Mr Lenton if we could keep this between ourselves,” said Sybil.

“Of course,” he replied, with a discreet bow of his head, “If Emma desists in this rumour-mongering I see no need to take the matter any further.”

Despite Sybil’s relief, a sour taste remained in her mouth. Shame coiled in the pit of her stomach. When she got home, she burned the blasted book; it seemed the only way to be rid of the thing once and for all. Then she went up to Emma’s room to set her daughter straight on a few things.

“You can’t go around tempting men,” she told her. “You’ll get a name for yourself. And mud sticks. Mr Morton is a good, decent man, but a man nevertheless. Now then. I have decided not to tell your father about this incident but I don’t want to hear any more about it. Least said, soonest mended. Do you understand?”

#

It had felt like sound advice at the time but when she thought of it now, Sybil felt a curdling in her gut, a sense of wrongdoing. Several years later Mr Morton was relieved of his teaching post. There'd been another girl with a similar story. The mother had taken a different approach to Sybil; she'd gone public with the sordid details. Six or seven girls came forward after that. They couldn't all be sluts. The youngest was only eleven.

Clive said it was a 'witch hunt' and Sybil didn't like to contradict him. Privately, the thought occurred to her that witches were women and since witches did not in fact exist, such women were therefore innocent of the crime for which they were persecuted. It seemed to Sybil that the persecution of a man for crimes that he did commit was the exact opposite of a witch-hunt. She said nothing but when she heard that the chap had been arrested, she felt in her chest an unexpected spangle of delight.

Sybil walked now with purpose, her navy court shoes striking a brisk clip on the tiles. Two squat rows of votive candles sat on a black iron stand at the edge of the chancel, the air above them blurred with heat. High above the altar, was a disc of coloured light, round as a communion wafer. What else could it be but the eye of God Himself?

Sybil knew now why she had come; she had brought a candle. Fumbling in her bag, she seemed to lose her focus in a haze of nervous energy. The bag felt unbearably buoyant, as if it contained not just a candle, but all the light of the world. It flew from her grip, sailing up into the emptiness, crashing back to earth and spilling its contents across the floor. Clive was right; she couldn't be trusted to do anything except bake cakes. These days not even that.

Scrambling on the slippery tiles, Sybil clawed together her scattered belongings: her compact mirror, her purse, her comb, the dented candle. And as she struggled on

her hands and knees, she felt the weight of the years pressing down on her, all her guilty sins crushing her into the cold, hard floor where she belonged – a sinner, a daughter of Eve – grovelling for forgiveness. She had driven away everyone she ever cared about, failed as a wife and failed as a mother: she did not deserve to call herself by either title.

With her head bowed, Sybil allowed her sorrow to overwhelm her. Wretched sounds swam from her mouth like fleeing demons. And as if in quiet answer, she felt a flame of hope within her, the heat of God's love all around her. She flung out her arms, filled with a searing luminosity, and all at once, she was home.

#

Kneeling at the hearth, smoke in her nostrils, Sybil's blistering fingertips reach for more. Emma's words smoulder in her lap, scorching black marks into her skirt. Emma has made monsters of them! Reduced her loving parents to gargoyles! She hasn't even had the decency to change their names! The air drains from Sybil's lungs. She understands now what Clive was asking; she knows what must be done.

She runs upstairs and checks the bathroom cabinet for her sleeping pills. To her consternation, she finds the little beast has stolen them, just as she's written. Sybil curses her for that: without those pills, she'll not get a lick of sleep tonight.

And what if Emma has swallowed them? She'll have committed a mortal sin for one thing. Sybil won't be able to show her face in church. Clementine Barton will have something to crow about: *Well, I always said that incident in the pond was a cry for help. No one believed me. Now look.*

It doesn't bear thinking about.

It suddenly occurs to Sybil that there might be more. She sweeps into Emma's bedroom, tearing open the door so hard that a balletic letter E tumbles down from its nameplate. She steps into the liar's lair.

On her hands and knees, Sybil dredges out everything from under the bed – all Emma's notebooks and diaries, pads thick with poems and stories. She finds that her daughter has been hoarding words, sharp and dirty as an addict's needles. Sybil reads in fevered snatches, at once repelled and enthralled.

*Mummy found me with my fingers in my knicks,
Daddy made me pay with the wrath of forty licks.*

She scrunches up the page with the force of her fist.

*I saw Mummy sucking Santa Claus
Underneath the lamb of God last night.*

Fist scrunch.

Maddox bends Sybil over the pew.

Fist scrunch.

How could a child of fifteen wreak such violence in ink? It is obscene! Reams of it – the lies and fantasies of a vicious little tart. Clawing it all into a pile, Sybil makes a hammock of her skirt and carries the filth downstairs in bundles to be burnt, like a

dismembered body. Clive has left a box of safety matches on the mantelpiece and Sybil reaches for it now. Her hands trembling with rage, she strikes up a match and sets fire to Emma's lies. No one must know. It would be more than Sybil could bear. She gazes into the flames, transfixed. She does not move until she is certain it is gone: every scrap of paper, every filthy word, every last trace of the girl.

#

It had taken twenty years but at last Sybil could see the light. Here, in the cathedral, under the eye of God, she felt the flames of truth licking around her body, choking her, blaming her.

All those words, each one a scream for help that Sybil had chosen not to hear. Only now could she admit the truth, that her shame had been greater than her love.

The pain of atonement was excruciating. Flames lapped along Sybil's outstretched arms.

"I repent! Merciful Father, I repent!" she cried out.

But in the blinding light of revelation, it wasn't God's face she saw; it was Emma's, just as she'd seen her on the television, crowned and robed, her lips moving in an ecstatic glossolalia. She turned to Sybil and smiled. And as Sybil's nostrils filled with her own acrid stink, she understood that Emma had led her here, not to deliverance but into the flames of hell itself. For what Sybil had done, there would be no forgiveness.

PART 2

Llanelli, August 2014.

It had to be the hottest day of the year. Alys plucked at the collar of her blouse, peeling the cotton from her skin like clingfilm as she took her seat next to Siôn.

“Wish I’d brought the little fan from home,” she said, setting down her bag in the recess at her feet.

All around them were the cream of Welsh-speaking Wales; writers, actors, academics, politicians, all crushed together row upon row in a sterile white box like specimens in a lab.

Alys missed the fuschia peaks of the old Pavilion.

“At least the acoustics are good,” she said.

“Myn yffach i.” *Bloody Hell.*

“What?”

“Hasn’t it hit you yet?”

A sulphurous odour drifted up between the seats.

“Two thousand sweating bodies crammed in here like cattle and some fucker drops a bomb like that...”

Alys frowned at the English profanity.

Siôn’s gaze ran fiercely along the rows of the auditorium, as if the back of a head, or the stoop of a shoulder might signal the perpetrator’s guilt. Alys rummaged in her bag for her spritzer but she’d left it at the hotel. She could picture it now, sitting on top of the vanity unit in the bathroom.

“It’s supposed to be the cultural pinnacle of the year!” said Siôn.

“Well... even poets fart.”

He wheeled round with an accusatory glare.

“It wasn’t you was it?”

“Of course it wasn’t me!”

She found a leaflet for *Merched y Wawr* and attempted to waft away the stench with this symbol of Welsh propriety – Daughters of the Dawn – the Welsh-language WI.

The pavilion hummed with a low, respectful murmur as the audience waited for the last ceremony of the Eisteddfod to begin. In the middle of the stage, stood an empty wooden chair, rather more elegant than grand but large enough to be a throne. The back was a tower of sleek beech wood, arced around a swirling cutout, through which light shone like a sunburst. Alys looked away, focussed instead on the harpist at the far end of the stage, her swift hands casting a billowing melody over the crowd. The effect was soporific; two seats up from Alys, an elderly man was nodding into his chest.

“If someone were to set an actual bomb in this place,” said Alys, “the Welsh language would be obliterated in one puff of smoke.”

Siôn eyed the stage thoughtfully, as if weighing up the best place to plant such a bomb.

“Who’d set it though?”

“I dunno... extremists...”

“It takes passion to set a bomb.”

The TV presenter Siwan Jenkins caught Alys’s eye, lips parted in a plasticky smile. Alys lifted her hand and rippled her fingertips at her.

“Oh god,” she whispered, “Do you think she knows?” but Siôn’s mind was still with the extremists.

“I don’t think anyone cares enough about us to set a bomb,” he said, “It won’t be an act of violence that does for us. Something much more insidious...”

She’d heard this argument before; knew his thoughts as well as her own.

“Apathy.”

“That and politeness.”

The pavilion was almost full. A cloud of stewards hung about the doors, earnestly debating the health and safety risks of closing them as a last few stragglers made their way to their seats.

A blast from the herald horns and the elderly man two seats up lurched out of his snooze. The crowd seemed to take a collective breath; backs were straightened, noses raised, all eyes upon the stage. At its centre, two trumpeters broke the harp’s spell with a spray of brassy notes. The red dragon flickered beneath their bugles. In their maroon robes and gold-trimmed hats, they might have been summoning an army.

The council of druids filed down the central aisle of the pavilion to a majestic fanfare of organ music before settling into their seats on stage in rows of coloured robes: green, blue and white.

“Oh God, I haven’t got lipstick on my teeth have I?” said Alys.

Siôn smiled at her, taking her hand in his own.

“You look... perfect,” he said, and squeezing her fingers, he flared his eyes at her; their old code, a secret smile between them.

There was a blur of gold and white on stage, as the Archdruid took his place next to the empty throne. The sword of peace was placed in its holder and the audience broke out in spontaneous applause. Alys stifled a laugh; struck in the moment by the ridiculous pomp of it all. No odder than a coronation, she supposed. Except that here,

the only lineage that mattered was the line of one's metre and verse. Here was a monarchy of culture.

The trumpet fanfare sounded four times, instructing each corner of the pavilion to rise. There was a cumulative rustle and murmur as the entire auditorium rose to its feet for The Gorsedd Prayer. Meinir Tomos had the honour this year; a young Mezzo Soprano from Pwllheli. She'd never won a single prize at the Eisteddfod but since she came second in Britain's Got Talent, suddenly she was the toast of Wales. Beaten by a dancing dog – that must have stung. Still, here she was, on the Pavilion stage – better late than never, Alys supposed and fair play to the girl, what a voice. It was almost enough to make Alys feel the meaning of her words.

“Dyry Dduw dy Nawdd,” Meinir sang.

The audience returned this plaintive cry in a choral echo:

“Grant O God, thy protection”.

And though she sang out heartily, Alys felt the emptiness of those words in her mouth and envied again the deep faith of her friends, her colleagues, Siôn.

“Ag yn nawdd, nerth... *and in protection, strength;*”

Where was her faith? Not in God.

“Ag yn nerth, Deall... *and in strength, understanding;*”

“Ag yn Neall, Gwybod... *and in wisdom, knowledge;*”

“Ac yngwybod, gwybod y cyfiawn... *and in knowledge, knowledge of righteousness;*”

“Ag yngwybod yn cyfiawn, ei garu... *and in knowledge of righteousness, to love it;*”

Love, yes. That she could believe in.

“Ag o garu, caru pob hanfod... *and from loving it, to love all things essential;*”

Love of a language.

“Ag ymhob Hanfod, caru Duw... *and in loving all existing things, love God:*”

Love of a culture.

“Duw a phob Daioni... *God and all goodness.*”

Love of the land.

The Archdruid stood before the crowd, white robes trailing, golden swags winking under the artificial lights.

“Good afternoon friends, we’ve reached the last ceremony of the week, the Chairing of the Bard. In a moment we shall discover if he or she is among us, but first, let us hear from our judges. Aled Iorwerth will deliver the adjudication.”

Alys felt her spine prickling with a thousand tiny stabs of sweat. She was aware of words floating towards the crowd but somehow her mind failed to take hold of them.

“Exceptional standard.... searing imagery recurring themes....”

A rash of anxiety crept up her neck, spread to the hollow of her throat, where her necklace trembled to the rhythm of her heart.

“We have come to a unanimous decision.”

In the stillness, Alys could hear Siôn’s breath whistling through his nasal hair. Her own breath seemed to harden in her chest like a stone; a dead weight. The Archdruid wore a solemn expression.

“When the Gorsedd Trumpeters play the fanfare, would Perdita and Perdita only, please stand up.”

A toast of golden notes. The lights dimmed save for a single spotlight that chased across the darkened rows of the auditorium, searching. Tingling, weightless, Alys’ limbs didn’t seem to belong to her. The old terror clenched deep in her muscles, vivid as an open wound.

The trumpet call ceased.

Silence, but for the caged bird of her heart. But here was Siôn, always Siôn. She felt his firm, calloused hand in hers, his steady gaze, reminding her that she was here, against all the odds – alive. She rose to her feet and allowed the spotlight to engulf her.

The applause might have been a tropical rainstorm; a sound so loud that it seemed to hang in the air like a haze. Light blazed through the auditorium on a fuse of flashing bulbs and sparking cameras, lenses zooming as the eyes of a nation fixed upon one face. Screwing down her courage, Alys thrust out her jaw and set her gaze on the advancing druids. For three long minutes, she stood alone in the spotlight. Found.

The hours after the chairing were foggy. Every Welsh language newspaper and magazine wanted a bite of her. There were calls from television producers and radio editors, each one clamouring for a scoop from their newly crowned bard. The most pressing question was one of *perthyn*; to whom did she belong, this Alys Protheroe? Daughter of Hawys Protheroe. Granddaughter to the poet, Dafydd Protheroe. Wife to Siôn Idris AM. Each person was a pick in the warp and weft of belonging; without them, she was no one.

Siôn marched Alys across the *maes* – the festival ground – from one interview to the next, a protective arm about her shoulders. It didn't stop complete strangers cutting in to shake her hand and congratulate her on her achievement.

"Diolch o galon," she said again and again until the words began to feel like a mantra, this thank you that came 'from the heart.'

A woman beetled towards Alys, her arms open wide.

"Do you remember your Aunty Anwen? I remember you, hiding at the back of the Chapel like a mouse, barely a word for anyone. Who'd have thought you had all those words inside you? Your mother would be so proud."

This was the bittersweet truth of the day. For it was Hawys's dream to see Alys here, ever since they had sat cwtshed up on the sofa in Yr Hafan the summer of 2001, watching Mererid Hopwood rise from the darkened crowd, to take her place in history, the first woman to win The Chair. Alys had been home six years by then. She had begun to write limericks in birthday cards, a Christmas englyn 'For Mam'. Small offerings that delighted Hawys and dared her to believe that one day maybe,

"You could do that, Alys."

Today's triumph belonged to Hawys. It was she who wove the broken girl back together, who fed her TH Parry Williams and Gwenallt and Dic Jones, who drummed poetry into her bones. Her mother's absence cast a shadow over Alys's pleasure, the wish that Hawys had only lived long enough to see this day.

"Wyt ti'n iawn?" asked Siôn. *You okay?*

Alys smiled, nodded, clung to his hand.

They had arrived at the media tent, where Alys was obliged to give a live television interview for S4C. The pop-up studio was a hard-walled marquee with minimalist decor: splashes of acid yellow, a stiff red couch, a glass coffee table rimmed with steel. Alys perched on the edge of the couch while a make up artist dabbed away the shine on her forehead – a pointless exercise – her hairline was already beading with fresh sweat.

She'd been expecting Llyr Owen but for reasons that were explained to her and yet which she failed to grasp, Alys was presented instead with the fierce grin of Ceri Rampart.

"Alys!" she beamed, her small arms outstretched for a cwtsh.

"Wel y jiw jiw, mae'n braf i dy weld di – llongyfarchiadau enfawr!"

She gushed these congratulatory words with the familiarity of an old friend. Alys endured the embrace with limp resistance.

“Ceri... am sypreis hyfryd,” said Alys though it wasn’t a lovely surprise at all. They were old acquaintances rather than friends, having been students together at Lampeter University. Ceri had sought Alys out in their first week with unnerving determination, cornering her in the common room and demanding to know:

“Is it true? Are you really Alys Protheroe? My God you look so different! I’d never have recognised you.”

Overcoming her initial terror, Alys had smiled and composed herself: she had prepared for this eventuality. She and Siôn had been working on her backstory for years: she knew the names of her primary school form teachers, the colour of her school uniform, the after-school clubs she had attended. It was just a matter of working out how this ‘Ceri Rampart’ fitted into Alys’s brief history.

“Our mums were in the same poetry recitation group: Meillion y Maes,” said Ceri. She read the blankness in Alys’s eyes and said, “Don’t you remember? We used to play in the back field while they practiced: me, you, Rachel and Mei...”

Alys made a noise of vague recognition.

“Mum said you died,” said Ceri.

Alys had laughed then, holding out her arms as if they were proof that Ceri was wrong.

“Well as you can see, I’m very much alive,” she said, slipping into her script. She had told the story so many times that she could conjure its images in her mind like memories: Roger packing her into his navy Ford Escort, speeding her across the bridge to England. It was all so real and vivid; it might have been true.

“Well that explains your English accent, “ said Ceri but her gaze remained sceptical. All through university, Alys had kept Ceri at a distance, unnerved by the inquisitive slant of her gaze, an uneasy sense that Ceri was not convinced. Today, she could at last put an end to that speculation; today Alys had proved on her own terms that she belonged.

“Shall we just run through some questions before we go to air?” said Ceri, grinning wildly. There was something predatory in those eager little features, Alys thought, something unnatural about a face that is always smiling.

“I’d like to start with a bit about your background re-learning Welsh and how you were – ”

“No.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m happy to talk about the poem.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry Ceri but... I’m just not interested in raking over the past. I’ve left all that behind.”

“I see.”

Ceri smiled tightly.

“Okay, well... why Perdita for your ‘nom de plume’? A character from Shakespeare if I’m not mistaken?”

The truth was too revealing; Alys felt suddenly naked. Where was Siôn? She cast her eyes around but he was nowhere to be seen.

“I... liked the name,” she said, feebly.

Ceri frowned, her lips pursed in an incredulous little smile.

“You just... liked the name,” she repeated slowly, tapping the point of her pen on her notebook.

“So it’s not connected to the title of your winning poem then? – ‘Esgyrn y ferch ar goll’ – *Bones of the lost girl*. A reference to Princess Gwenllian, perhaps? Two lost princesses. One English; one Welsh.”

Alys felt faint. An English jingle from her childhood kept playing around and around in her head: *I feel like chicken tonight, like chicken tonight!*

“Can I have a drink of water please?”

“Of course.”

Ceri nodded to a runner, a lanky boy with trousers so low on his hips that when he bent down to retrieve a plastic cup from the water-cooler, his small bottom peeped up at them over his designer boxers. Alys turned her eyes to the floor. Ceri kept on smiling. They sat in silence while the water cooler belched.

A plastic tumbler was placed in Alys’ hand; she muttered her thanks and took an icy sip.

Ceri cocked her head to one side and began nodding again.

“Where did you get your inspiration for the poem?”

“I read an article, years ago now, about the skeleton of a girl, found in a cave near Gower. As I’m sure you’re aware, back in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the coastline there was riddled with smugglers and wreckers. I suppose the story just captured my imagination. Was she murdered? Did she fall? Was she a victim? Or was she herself, a wrecker?”

There was a pause. Ceri wheeled her hand on her wrist.

“So... what’s the answer?”

“You’ll have to decide that for yourself.”

There was a small herumph from Ceri as she resumed her furious scribbling.

“How about influences?”

I feel like chicken tonight, like chicken tonight!

Alys couldn't get the advert out of her mind. Damn earworm.

“Well?”

She could think of Kate Roberts, Daniel Owen, Islwyn Ffowc Elis, but not a single poet. She felt her heart beating in her throat, as if at any moment it might make a bid for freedom, and leap from her gullet like a fish.

“Mae'n flin 'da fi, *I'm sorry*, my mind has just gone... blank.”

“The character in the poem is Beatrice. Another Shakespearean reference... there is a decidedly English presence in the poem. Would you care to elaborate on that?”

“No, well, I don't know. I can't seem to think –”

“Perhaps we'll come back to that one...”

“Iawn. *Okay.*”

“Where did you learn cynghanedd? Are you a member of a bardic school?”

“My mother taught me. Then later, yes, I joined a group.”

“Which group?”

Words failed her again – “I'm not sure, I'm not currently, I mean,” – they kept getting tangled on her tongue. She thought of Eluned Phillips. Not sufficiently erudite, they said. She couldn't have written Clymau. She must have stolen the words from her lover.

The director cut in. They were going live on air in five, four, three –

Alys had rehearsed all these questions with Siôn, and yet now, when it mattered, she felt something like vertigo, an irrational compulsion to stray from the script, to leap from the cliff path of her life and dash it all on the rocks. What would it take? A few

movements of her mouth: a controlled expulsion of air through the fleshy mechanisms of diaphragm, glottis, tongue.

When the theme music ended and the camera light flashed red, Alys came alive. The relief on Ceri's face was laughable. She sat back as Alys launched into a spiel about the relationship between language and landscape; the psychogeography of her poetic imagination. She read admiration on Ceri's face but something else too: the ghost of her old suspicion. For after all this time, today, when it really counted, when she had the chance to prove that she was worthy of the name, 'Alys Protheroe', she had fucked it all up, let the mask slip. Ceri had glimpsed something she wasn't supposed to see and it was only a matter of time before the spark of her curiosity would leap up into a flame.

In the weeks that followed, Alys became a regular contributor on TV and radio programmes, a pundit on matters of language and politics. Siôn's role in the Assembly meant that they were often drafted in as a two-for-one offer on the sofa of 'P'nawn Da' – S4C's daily afternoon magazine programme. She was given her own Arts programme to present. A couple of times, she bumped into Ceri Rampart in a production corridor at the BBC. There was a coolness beyond that perpetual smile; Alys sensed that she was being watched, that Ceri was just waiting for her to make a misstep.

Alys was live on Radio Cymru when it happened, almost a year after the chairing. Her week had been unsettled, she was distracted by a story, the body of a young girl, unearthed during excavations for a new playground in Roedale park. It was all over the national press. The remains were half petrified in cement, hidden in the foundations of the public toilets. Alys remembered those toilets being built. She remembered walking past the pit, an orange cement mixer splattered with mud. The body had yet to be identified, and yet, the papers were touting a name: Emma Granger.

She knew she ought not to look, not to trawl through the web for details, but it was irresistible. She read every news article and comment and blog post she could find, discovered a Reddit page full of conspiracy theories.

She was early for her radio interview, waiting alone in the sound booth, headphones on as the producer told her they were running a little late. And as she waited for her chance to talk about Welsh language education, she began scrolling through the English newsfeed on her phone, landed on a page of 'Unresolved Mysteries'. A post there made her heart thump hard.

I BELIEVE THAT TERRY TIMSON WAS NOT THE HERO EVERYONE BELIEVES HIM TO BE. I BELIEVE HE MURDERED EMMA GRANGER. IF ANYONE KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT EMMA OR TERRY, PLEASE CONTACT ME AT THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS: JUSTICEFOREMMA@GOOGLEMAIL.COM

"Ni'n barod amdanat ti rwan." *We're ready for you now.* The producer's voice came down the telephone line but she could not process his words.

"Alys? Wyt ti 'na?" *Are you there?*

Alys had ceased thinking in English a long time ago; almost every facet of her life was conducted in Welsh but here, in this moment, live on Radio Cymru, she said in English,

"Yes, I am. I'm here."

She recovered, switched quickly to Welsh and went on to speak vigorously of the importance of engaging young people's imagination, ensuring that they felt a deep connection to their language, that Welsh was theirs to express themselves in any way

they might choose. She had almost pulled it off, when halfway through a sentence, words simply fell away from her.

“Y prif beth yw...” *The most important thing is...*

The English word stood in her path like an obelisk: confidence.

“Hynny yw...” *That is...*

Confidence.

“Erm...”

Confidence.

The interviewer came to her rescue.

“Hyder, yfe?”

In her relief, she bit down on the word so hard that it burst from her mouth like a curse.

“Hyder!”

The presenter chuckled, then quickly wrapped up the conversation. A record came on the air and a voice came down the line. The producer thanked Alys for her contribution and the line went dead.

Alone in the sound booth, Alys removed her headphones and stared at the microphone in front of her. *What the fuck just happened?*

As soon as she was out of the studio, she called Siôn.

“Am gywilydd!” *Mortifying!*

“Now come on, let’s get this in perspective. Mildly embarrassing, yes, but not mortifying. It’s hardly cause for headlines.”

She should have told him about the ‘Unresolved Mysteries’. She should have told him that someone at last had accused Terry Timson. If they worked that out, what else

might they discover? Her mouth was dry, her throat closed around the words and before she knew it Siôn was saying goodbye; he had to get to a meeting.

Driving home, Alys tried to listen to the latest *Clera* podcast but her mind wandered, her humiliation returned afresh and she groaned out loud at the remembrance of it. How quickly she could destroy everything she had built; how easy it would be to let the veil fall.

Perhaps Ceri Rampart was listening, gathering evidence, ready to expose Alys as a fraud, a liar, a thief. Alys would have no one to blame but herself. Her own hubris had brought her here, to the brink of exposure. The Eisteddfod, the television show, the interviews. A strident voice spoke in her head: *That's what you get young lady, that's what you get.*

The fast strokes of the motorway beckoned. Even after all these years, there was still something within her that said – *run!* When the moment came, she took the turning home. For what life would she have, without Siôn? Besides, she couldn't prove him right.

"When life gets tough, you run," he said. "I don't have that privilege."

It was the one of the few things they argued about and they had been having the same argument since 1997.

The night of the devolution referendum, the family stayed up late to watch the results.

"Ti mynd i gael siom," Idris said to Hawys. *You're going to be disappointed.*

"Oh ye of little faith," she replied. "You'll see."

Idris did not wait to see. He took himself off to bed.

It was almost four in the morning when the results came in. Hawys's stomps shook the crockery on the dresser.

“We did it Gwen!” she yelled at her friend’s photograph, “We’re getting our Assembly!”

In the cheering and embracing and celebrating, Alys watched Siôn’s smiling mouth and thought how much she would like to kiss it.

Later, after Hawys had gone to bed, Alys and Siôn sat up drinking Idris’s cider and talking about the future. Siôn said this was a brave new Wales and he was going to be a part of it. He was going to make things better. Alys kissed him, followed him up to bed.

Somewhere between dawn and breakfast, Siôn said, “What are we going to do?”

“Let’s run away together,” said Alys. “Somewhere the rain feels like a warm shower.”

Siôn froze beside her.

“We could go to France or Italy,” said Alys. “I could learn Italian.”

“I thought you got it,” said Siôn. “After last night. I thought you understood. I’m not going anywhere. Maybe you can just shake off your roots, dress yourself up in a different language and pretend you’re made new but I can’t. I won’t run from who I am.”

It hurt. Siôn’s honesty was brutal.

“I love this country, this language,” said Alys.

“You choose to love it. You can un-choose it. To be born into it is something else. It’s a responsibility; it’s the weight of a nation.”

Siôn was right; she couldn’t understand. Perhaps she never would, for years later, long after they were married, on days when the rain was relentless, when seasons passed from cold and wet to warm and wet, Alys would turn to him and say brightly,

“What about the south of France? Just for a year or two – ”

And Siôn would sigh and give her a wry smile, tell her for the umpteenth time,

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m sorry but there it is. I don’t expect you to understand...”

“I know,” she would say, parodying her husband’s pompous tone: “It is the weight... of a nation.”

Home. The sight of her tall white house on top of the hill filled Alys with pleasure. She and Siôn had rebuilt the place from ruins and made it their own. The sky was swollen with sea mist, chalk smudges against the darkening clouds. She slid her key into the lock and heard Nan on the other side of the front door, claws skittering excitedly on the wood floor.

“Helô ti,” said Alys, sweeping inside. She stooped to rub the old girl’s ruff, grateful for her slobbery welcome home.

The dog pattered after her as Alys lumbered through to the kitchen and opened the fridge door. She stood in its yellow glare, contemplating the contents, knowing that she was about to make things worse. In an act of self-flagellation, she began putting things into her mouth: a wedge of Perl Las, a pickled gherkin, a slab of pâté. She tipped a pot of pitted olives into her mouth, barely even bothering to chew as she gulped them down. Siôn had wrapped the remains of Sunday’s roast chicken in foil. She brought it out now and tore off chunks with her teeth, gobbling at the carcass until her chin was greasy and bits of sinew were stuck between her teeth. When she was finished, she gave Nan a handful of skin and meat and trudged upstairs, wearing her self-loathing like a drenched duffel coat.

That afternoon, she was supposed to be writing an opinion piece for ‘Barn’ magazine but she couldn’t focus. Instead, she sat at her desk, trawling the web for

distractions, clicking her way through a menagerie of celebrity pets that resembled their owners and trying not to look at the 'Unresolved Mysteries' message board.

Some time around midnight, when Siôn still wasn't back from the Assembly, Alys poured herself a large glass of Chablis and logged onto the website. In order to leave a comment, she would have to give herself a log in name. She scanned around her bookshelves. Nothing Welsh. Nothing obvious. Perhaps it was *The Collected Shakespeare* or perhaps it was something else, lodged in the tenebrous depths of her subconscious. The name she dredged out was Beatrice. It took her three deleted attempts before she pressed 'post reply' and wrote: *Maybe your friend doesn't want to be found. The best way to honour her life is to live your life to the full.*

Roedale, 2015.

Clive was waiting for Kate at the entrance to St Hilda's. It was a thirty-minute drive from Roedale but the burns unit had an excellent reputation, quite as good as anything you might get with private insurance, according to Clive. Parking was a nightmare of course; Clive was still harping on about 'daylight robbery' as he led Kate down the labyrinthine corridors to the Intensive Care Unit. She trailed after his clipping steps, trying to make a mental note of their route in case she had to find her way out alone.

"Who's got the baby?" said Clive.

"Lawrence."

"That's good of him."

"Not really, he's Bobby's dad after all."

"To come home early from work, I mean. He's an important man at the council these days you know."

"Yes well, he's important at home too."

"Of course. Family comes first."

He flashed his white smile at her – one of the perks of marrying a dentist, Kate supposed. There was an uncomfortable few minutes in which neither of them spoke. Kate listened to the syncopated clip-clop of their shoes and tried to think of something to say. A nurse came down the corridor with a vase of drooping tulips.

"That reminds me," said Clive, "no flowers on the ward. Pollen – or something..."

"Well, probably for the best, all things considered."

"Quite so."

"Any news on the body in the park?" she said. "DNA tests or anything?"

He appeared not to hear her. Only a muscle at the corner of his mouth betrayed him.

“Clive?”

“No news.”

The cadence of his voice made Kate think that he was about to say something else but instead he struck up a tuneless whistle.

At last they came to the double doors of the Intensive Therapy Unit. Dutifully, Kate began washing her hands with the alcohol spray from the dispenser. Clive watched her with a look of distaste.

“It’ll mean the world to Sybil that you’ve come.”

“She’s conscious then?”

“Well, no.”

“Aren’t you going to –?”

She gestured to the sanitising gel.

“Do you know, it gives me a terrible rash,” said Clive, pressing the buzzer.

A mechanical bleat and they were admitted to the ward. Clive held the door open for Kate and she had to twist awkwardly to get past his protuberant belly.

“By the way,” he whispered, clutching her upper arm for a moment, “I’ve told them you’re her daughter.”

“What?”

“It’s family only.”

Registering the discomfort on Kate’s face, he seemed to bristle.

“Well do you want to see her or not?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Well then.”

The nurse on the reception desk was young and wispy; she spoke with a voice that brought to mind children's television programmes.

"Hello sweetheart," said Clive.

"Hello. Are you here to see Sybil?"

"Yes, back again. Can't keep away from the place, can I?"

The nurse turned to Kate with a sympathetic smile.

"You must be Emma – she's sedated now I'm afraid but she was asking for you earlier."

"Actually I –"

But Clive was already guiding her towards Sybil's room, the flat of his hand pressed against her lower back.

"Come on Emsy. Let's go see Mummy."

Once the nurse was out of earshot, he gave Kate a conspiratorial wink.

"Makes sense to do things this way," he said, "Now you can come and visit her any time you like."

And though she would kick herself for it later, Kate found herself saying, "Thank you, Clive."

It was a shock to see the bandaged body on the hospital bed. There was little to identify her as being Sybil but for the few belongings at her bedside: her reading glasses, a monogrammed handkerchief and a floral-print nightgown, neatly folded and utterly redundant. According to Clive, Sybil's upper body had been worst affected. The polyester of her blouse had melted like candle wax, fusing with the skin of her arms and chest. The lacquer in her hair had gone up like a sparkler and if it hadn't been for a quick thinking bystander who threw his coat over her head, Sybil's goose would have been cooked.

It was an unpleasant choice of words and the way that Clive chuckled at the end of his little speech made Kate want to choke him. Instead, she started sobbing.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Clive, “Come on now. It’s not that bad. She’ll live.”

Kate had a sudden premonition that he’d try to embrace her. The thought of being pressed against his bulbous gut was enough to force her to pull herself together.

“I still don’t understand what Sybil was doing there in the first place,” she said.

“A day trip apparently. I don’t know what bright spark thought that was a good idea. Linda says we should sue. It’s not cheap you know – Earlsdon Palace. I had to sacrifice a large sum of money for the annuity that pays for it.”

Kate could think of nothing to say; the silence was filled by the pneumatic wheeze of medical apparatus.

“Well. I suppose I should get off,” Clive said presently. “Sammy will need picking up from school. Will you be...?”

“I’ll be fine, honestly. It was just a shock, that’s all. You get going. I’ll stay here for a bit.”

“Right oh,” he said and turning to leave, he reached out a hand to touch Sybil’s bandaged arm, but seemed then to think better of it. Instead, he stuffed his hand in his pocket and rattled his loose change.

“Cheerio then.”

Kate listened to his jaunty whistle as it shrank away down the hall. Settling down in the chair next to Sybil’s bed, Kate peered through the gauze of cables and plastic tubes between them. Sybil’s eyes were closed, her lids trembling with dreams. Her eyebrows were gone and the skin there had turned a dark, livid red. Where the bandages rose to cover her nose, Kate caught a glimpse of the gore that lay beneath.

“Oh, Sybil. You poor thing.”

The hand closest to Kate had three unburned fingers. She slid her palm under these, and began to talk about her day – she’d read somewhere it was what you were supposed to do in these situations.

“I’m sorry Sybil, you don’t want to hear all this. I’m boring myself here.”

And as if to prove the point, she yawned ostentatiously. She was tempted to mention the body in the park, if only to have something to say.

Letting go of Sybil’s hand, Kate sat back in the chair and stared at the flimsy curtain that edged the bed, its insipid stripes rippling against the oxygen tank. Listening to the monotonous bleeping of devices, Kate allowed her eyes to close and her mind to wander.

If Sybil was right, if Emma were alive, then perhaps she was watching somewhere; perhaps this calamity was the very thing to pull the Granger family back together. Emma would hear of Sybil’s accident and rush to her bedside. A pang of anxiety then, as Kate remembered that she had signed in using Emma’s name. All day she’d tried to push Emma from her thoughts and now here she was, pretending to be her. Emma would have approved; it was just the sort of game she’d liked to play when they were children.

“Let’s tell everyone we’re cousins! No, even better – twins!”

“But Emma, we don’t look anything alike.”

“Doesn’t matter. Most people are pretty feeble-minded. If you tell them something with enough conviction, they’ll believe it. The secret to lying well,” said Emma, “is that you’ve got to believe your story. If you can convince yourself, you can convince anyone.”

Anyone but me, thought Kate. Clementine might have indulged Emma’s ‘stories’ over the years, but Kate had grown immune to them. She remembered waking one

morning, when she was about twelve, to a pair of pale grey eyes, quietly studying her.

“Emma?”

She’d sat up in bed, startled. “What are you doing here?”

“Duh! We had a sleepover? Don’t you remember?”

Blinking, Kate had stared stupidly at her.

“What a dummy!” said Emma, “You don’t even remember your best friend coming over for a sleepover. Maybe it’s like that film ‘Overboard’ – maybe you’ve got amnesia.”

She insisted Kate get dressed because they were going ice-skating at the new rink over in Plumstead – Clementine had promised – or had Kate forgotten that as well? The big durr-brain.

Kate went dutifully to her wardrobe, raking through memories of the night before. She’d been allowed to stay up to watch Poirot but there was definitely no sleepover. And yet, she did recall something – she had woken in the middle of the night to the groan of metal joints unfolding; the steel twang of the ancient zed bed as its springs stretched and settled. Clementine’s reassuring voice in her ear:

“Go back to sleep.”

It wasn’t the first time that Emma had ‘run away’ to The Laurels. She would show up with her bags packed, demanding that Clementine and Art adopt her. Sometimes, Kate would catch a glimpse of bruises bursting like storm clouds on the back of Emma’s thighs. At some point Sybil would arrive, insisting that the punishment was proportional and nobody else’s business. *Spare the rod and spoil the child.*

Kate let Emma wear her best flowery jeans and the Betty Boop sweatshirt she had received for her birthday. Emma accepted these as her due and leafed through Kate’s copy of Mizz Magazine:

“Johnny Depp’s gone and got a tattoo saying Winona Forever,” she said.

“Cool.”

“Not if they break up.”

Kate was standing in her knickers and brand new mini-bra. Emma eyed this jealously for as her brother Dan never failed to point out, Emma was still as flat as a ruler. Kate turned her back, her face mottled with shame as she pulled a jumper over her head.

“Ugh,” said Emma. “You’ve got a massive spot on your bum.”

Downstairs in the kitchen, Clementine greeted them both as if Emma’s appearance were entirely expected.

“Morning girlies.”

Kate’s little brother and sister were already tucking into breakfast. Abi’s dad, Art, was the cook in the Barton household and he’d gone to town that morning: scrambled eggs, bacon, big buttery mushrooms and Emma’s favourite – eggy bread.

“That’s right – eat up,” he said, “Fill your boots.”

Clementine clapped her hands together with a bright smile.

“So, who fancies going to the new ice rink today?” she said.

There were cries all round of “Me! Me! Me!” and Emma smiled at Kate with a smugness that said: *I told you so.*

While Emma was in the bathroom, Kate helped her mother dry the dishes. She’d been sulky all through breakfast; bruised by a sense of injustice.

“You all right kiddo?” said Clementine.

“Emma says she came for a sleepover last night. She says the reason I can’t remember is because I knocked my head and now I have amnesia.”

Clementine pursed her lips and scrubbed at the eggy saucepan.

“Mum? I’m not stupid. You’re all acting like this is normal but it’s not. Emma’s always lying and you just let her get away with it.”

Clementine’s eyes lingered on the doorway; she lowered her voice to a murmur.

“I know, darling, I know.”

“Why don’t you tell her off?”

“Sweetheart, it’s complicated... I know it’s hard for you to understand but Emma needs to tell stories, in order to feel better about things.”

“What things?”

“Difficult things. We need to show Emma compassion and the kindest thing we can do is listen to her.”

“She’s a liar!”

“Kate. Things aren’t always black and white. Now please: be kind. You are the strong one afterall.”

Clementine sank her hands into the soapy dishwater and Kate knew that the subject was closed.

#

The moment Kate opened her eyes, a tide of guilt washed in. The clock on the wall read five twenty-six. She must have fallen asleep; God knows what the nurses would think of her. Bobby was due a feed and she’d not given a second thought to dinner. Perhaps Lawrence would take the initiative; it’d be pasta and pesto again. She retrieved her jacket from the back of the chair and looped her handbag over her chest. Sybil hadn’t moved from her position on the bed but as she leaned in to say goodbye, Kate thought

she saw a flicker of movement at the corner of her mouth – the shadow of a smile, perhaps.

“I’ve got to go now Sybil,” she said.

There was a shuffle of feet in the corridor outside and Kate felt suddenly self-conscious, as if she were being observed. A pair of grey eyes flashed into her mind.

“I’ll come back again very soon Sybil, I promise.”

Somebody coughed in the corridor outside and Kate’s eyes snapped up. Her head felt improbably light. She told herself she’d got to her feet too quickly; best take some deep breaths. Holding on to the bed rail she filled her lungs with musty hospital air, and as she lowered her head, a shadow flapped past the door like the black wing of a crow.

Kate’s heart picked up pace; her scalp felt peculiarly hot and tingly, as if every follicle were charged with a positive current. Following the darkness felt inevitable. She moved towards the door. Moments later, she was standing in the corridor outside Sybil’s room, watching a black ghost glide away from her. Except it wasn’t a ghost – it was a woman of flesh and blood and she was wearing a niqab. She couldn’t explain it, but Kate found herself following the woman’s soft steps down the corridor, her eyes trained on the glimpse of a sandal, its thick heel worn down into a lopsided wedge. Sybil had made Emma wear insoles for her fallen arches.

Kate was moving now at a brisk trot. Somehow, she had to get closer. The woman had a mobile phone pressed to her ear – a flashy new model, winking with diamantes. But the language she was speaking was too glottal and rasping to be plausible. There was something familiar in the taper of her hands, conicle-shaped fingers, nails nibbled to the quick. As Kate closed in on the woman, there was no longer any room for doubt. Certainty closed its fist on reason.

She clapped her hand down on the woman's shoulder. The fragile little bones seemed to shrink from Kate's touch, but she would not be deterred. She yanked the woman round so that she dropped her phone with a yelp, staring up at Kate with large, fearful eyes, the irises brown as hazelnuts. Coloured contact lenses, no doubt. Kate knew with a deep and certain instinct that she was right. Hooking her fingertips over the taut fabric at the bridge of the woman's nose, she tore the black veil away so that they stood at last, face to face. She might have fooled everyone else but she would never fool Kate.

"Emma."

#

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Lawrence's face was basin white, his chin trembling, eyes loaded with fear. He stalked around the kitchen with his hands on his hips while Kate sat in the rocking chair, her head lowered. She'd had to call him to come and collect her from the hospital. It was humiliating. He was making her out to be some kind of lunatic.

"I thought we were past all this," he said.

"It was a moment of madness. I'm just so... tired."

"Well enough's enough. You're going to see Chundra and you're giving up the breast-feeding. It's beyond a joke. You're lucky you weren't arrested."

On this point, she knew, he was right. Thankfully, the woman in the hospital had agreed not to press charges. The moment Kate held the veil in her fingers, the spell had broken. She saw at once her own foolishness and tried to replace the woman's niqab but she had no idea how or where it was fastened. She could only repeat I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, until the woman pushed her away and quickly, efficiently, refastened the veil

herself. The nurse had already called Security and in the time it took for them to arrive, Kate tried to offer an explanation.

“It sounds so stupid, I know...”

The words came out garbled and she found herself crying. She pulled a crumpled tissue from her sleeve, blew her nose.

“I thought my friend would come. How could she not come and visit her own mother? How could Emma not come? And then I thought it would be just like her to come in secret, to dress up in a disguise...”

The brown eyes stared at her, judging her but when the security guard arrived, she said that she did not intend to take the matter further. Kate sobbed her gratitude and allowed the wispy nurse from the reception desk to usher her into a quiet room.

“Take some deep breaths now,” the nurse said, “Is there someone I can call?”

On his haunches now, Lawrence took Kate’s hands in his own.

“I need to know, Kate. How long have you been ‘seeing’ Emma?”

She snatched her hands away.

“I’m not ‘seeing’ her...”

“Is it like before?”

“That was totally different - I was unwell!”

“That’s what I’m worried about. The timing of this - ”

“The timing? Oh, I’m sorry, is it inconvenient?”

“That’s not what I meant. Look. If you’re heading for a breakdown then I need to know.”

“I’ll get together with your assistant shall I? Work on scheduling a convenient time for me to ‘break down’.”

Jade's footsteps thumped through the ceiling. The baby monitor lit up.

"Lower your voice will you?"

Standing now, Lawrence paraded stiffly up and down the length of the kitchen.

"Your behaviour... it's not normal. You need help."

"Not normal?"

"You shouldn't have been on the ward. It's family only. I saw the name you used to sign in. Why the hell are you going around impersonating your dead friend?"

"I wasn't impersonating her – that was Clive! He told me to –"

She took a breath, ran her hands over her face.

"– and don't call her that."

Lawrence stepped awkwardly towards the window, shoving his hands in his pockets. For a moment there was silence, as if the whole house were poised for the words to come.

"Lawrence?"

His eyes were fixed on the apple tree outside, its boughs blackening in the dusk.

"Lawrence, what is it?"

She watched a tendon in his neck flex and recede. Still he would not turn to her. Panic strangled her voice.

"Have you heard something... about the body in the park?"

When he turned to look at her, his hands were screwed into fists at his side, his lips pressed pale. She could see that in that moment, he wanted to hurt her.

"Female," he said. "Teenage."

It was what she'd always feared but to hear the words – a weight dropped inside her, a stone, plunging down the well of her stomach.

Lawrence seemed to lose his nerve. He stepped towards her, hands outstretched. "It's not confirmed yet," he said.

It was too late; the room blurred; the walls around her seemed to sag and billow, folding in upon her in a slow implosion. And though she was sitting, she was slipping, nothing to cling to. Lawrence rushed towards her. She felt his grasp on her arm, the assured strength of it. He would not let her fall. He pressed her to his chest, his voice drained of anger, thick with tears.

"I'm sorry, my love. I'm so sorry."

Clementine flew back that very week, brown and slender as a hazel switch and ready to whip everyone into line. It was decided that she would move in to The Laurels for a while, to give Kate a chance to recuperate from the 'nervous exhaustion' that Dr Chundra diagnosed. And though Kate was relieved to have her mother home, the pleasure was tainted by the resentment her presence stirred in Lawrence. He had offered to take some time off work but Clementine wouldn't hear of it.

"There's no need," she said, "Now that I'm here."

Lawrence called her the human bulldozer, barging into their home, reorganising the kitchen drawers, stocking up on pulses and weird spices that made Lawrence feel nauseous when he opened the cupboard door.

It wasn't normal, he said, for a grown woman to depend upon her mother like this.

"I don't depend upon her," Kate whispered furiously behind their bedroom door. Lawrence rolled his eyes. He didn't bother to lower his voice.

"You can't do anything without her approval," he said, "I suggest a walk, and you look to her for permission! And that bloody irritating face she does." – He made a

beseeking expression, mimicking her voice – “*Do you really think you’re up to that darling? It’s like she wants to keep you down, keep you... weak.*”

Kate’s eyes tightened at the word.

“Weak?”

“She undermines your self-confidence; she makes you revert to being a child, instead of standing up and facing life.”

Spite surged in Kate’s chest. The audacity of this pompous, privately educated pillock! The greatest challenge he had ever had to overcome was not being Mummy’s favourite.

“You’re jelaous! Your own mother couldn’t give a shit what you do, so you pick faults with *my* Mum who has just flown halfway around the world to be here.”

A tremble of pain in his jaw.

“Fuck you,” he said quietly.

She watched him leave the room, rigid with rage, saying nothing. The truth was: he would never understand Kate’s relationship with Clementine until she told him about *the night of*. But she could not trust him with that information; he would not be able to handle it. Luke hadn’t. He had pleaded with Kate to tell him the truth about Jade but when she did, it wasn’t the truth that he wanted to hear. He had bailed on her – let her down. Even Art, her loving, bungling dad, had conked out on her, gnawed thin by a cancer that swallowed him whole just a few weeks after Kate’s wedding. His death had felt like a betrayal; she wasn’t finished with him; she still needed him.

Kate went downstairs to the den, where her mother was plumping cushions on the fouton.

“What is it?” she said, reading Kate’s pale face. “Have you and Lawrence been fighting again?”

Kate crumpled into her mother's embrace and allowed herself to be comforted. Perhaps Lawrence was right about some things. She did feel like a child again, snuggled up in the den with her head on Clementine's lap, listening to the low burr of her mother's voice:

"You can tell me anything, darling. There is no darkness within you that I can't love."

Clementine was fishing again, greedy for morsels that Kate was not willing to share. Even after all these years, Kate held fast to her secrets; the only things that were hers to keep. And if Kate were truthful with herself, perhaps Lawrence had a point. Clementine's love was treacle-sweet; perhaps it did keep her stuck in the past.

"I wonder why it's taking so long to identify the body," said Kate.

Clementine shrugged. "It's a murder investigation now. They'll be really careful about the information they give out." She sniffed, tugging the blanket up around her shoulders. "Such an unhappy girl. I tried to intervene several times over the years but it was always a question of proof. And Emma had so many stories... she could never stick to just one."

Kate sat up, running her hand over the dark roots of her matted hair.

"What happened to those papers she made me give you... her 'memoir' or whatever?"

"What about it?"

"Why didn't the police follow it up?"

"They tried. Clive must have got rid of it."

"How did Clive get his hands on it anyway?"

Clementine sighed, straightening the folds of her dressing gown with her palm and Kate noticed for the first time that her mother's hands were mottled with age spots.

“Does it matter?” Clementine said, “after all this time?”

Kate caught the scent of guilt on those words.

“You didn’t give it to him did you?”

Something in the tone of Kate’s voice made Clementine bristle with indignation.

“I went round there to talk to Sybil, to give her the opportunity to do the right thing. She was Emma’s mother after all. She must have suspected.”

“Emma gave you that manuscript in confidence.”

Clementine balked at the word *manuscript*.

“Did you give it to Sybil?” Kate asked.

The question flustered Clementine; she wouldn’t meet Kate’s gaze.

“Sybil wasn’t home,” she said.

Kate’s mood darkened.

“You gave it to Clive, didn’t you? The only evidence of what he’d been doing... and you just gave it to him.”

“What’s got in to you?” said Clementine but Kate could not account for the sudden flare of anger she felt. Her face twisted in disgust.

“You betrayed her.”

“I did not!”

Kate could see the pain she was inflicting, and though she hated herself for it, she could not stop.

“You just handed it over.”

Clementine seemed to rise up from within herself, the cords of her throat proud and sinewy. She spoke crisply, enunciating each word.

“I did not just hand it over. Clive took it from me.”

“And you let him!”

Tears streaked Kate's cheeks. She wiped them off with the back of her hand but still they came.

"You should have fought back!" she shouted.

Clementine reached out to her, her face set in that beseeching look Lawrence hated so much.

"You should have stopped him!"

"I was frightened!" said Clementine. "I was frightened of him."

It took a moment for her words settle; they shivered down like snowflakes.

Clementine drew Kate into her arms and began to rock her gently.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I let Emma down... but you were so depressed, I had to focus on you. You were my baby; you still are."

Kate looked up and saw for the first time how old her mother had grown, her skin spread thin over her cheekbones, swagged under her eyes. If she wasn't so brown, she would look ill. And she realised then that Lawrence was right, it wasn't fair for her to be caring for Kate after all this time. It was Kate who ought to be caring for Clementine.

When at last Kate emerged from the den, she caught Lawrence sitting at the top of the cold stone stairs, straining his ears for scraps.

"I was making up a bottle for Bobby," he said and though she reached out to him, he turned away from her. She had seen it though: the hurt in his eyes, the tears he was too proud to let fall. Things could not go on this way. The past would drag her down, sink her marriage – drown her if she let it.

And then Sybil died. That changed everything.

Llansteffan, South Wales, 2015.

The tide was on its way out; wavy sand flats stretched in its wake like corrugated iron. In her hand, Alys turned a piece of polished glass, the colour of jade – a cloudy treasure, combed from the shore. The colour made her think of fields bright with rain, cycling downhill, with the wind in her ears. She still missed the farm even after all these years living by the sea. Selling the place was the right decision of course – and who better than Owain Penrhiw to take the place on after Idris died? Still, Alys felt a melancholy longing for the past.

Alys cradled her empty mug to her chest, savouring the remnants of warmth on her fingers, watching the metallic glint of the sea, dented as hammered tin plate. A cold breath huffed from the vent above the patio doors. The deck outside was taking a pummelling. Up here, there was no protection from the salt wind but it was exhilarating too, to be so exposed, so close to the sky. A gull swung past the window like the bob of a pendulum.

Perhaps a brisk walk would shake loose the last stanza. It had been chasing around her mind for days. She'd the first half of the strict metre in place but the third and fourth consonants of the Cynghanedd Groes eluded her. Sometimes it helped to hear the rhythm of the sea; the rap of its iron fists on the shoreline, like a poet's staff.

"I'll take the dog out," she called to Siôn.

He was out back, fixing the hencoop. She watched through the back window as the dark crown of his head bobbed in and out of frame, the sky beyond him, ash white. From here in the living room, her eye ran the entire length of their telescope cottage. They'd knocked through to the kitchen so that the light from its wide plate window met

the light from the south-facing front and drenched it all with the sound of the sea. Siôn was practical like that – a man of grit and graft.

He strode into the kitchen now, his wellies clagged with mud.

“I’ll come with you – ” he said.

He knew that look on her face; the flitting glance of disappointment.

“Or not?”

“Do you mind?”

“Nah. Still got the back gate to fix anyway. Got a poem brewing, have you?”

She nodded, lifting her face for a kiss. He obliged with a stubbly swipe of his mouth. She smiled as he pulled away.

“What is it?”

“You and your ‘iet’,” she said, for he’d used the West-Walian word. “Nevermind you’re an AM. You’re still a hambôn – *a bumpkin*.”

“I am,” he said, turning for the back door, “and proud!”

The cottage at her back, Alys trod the crumbling path down towards the sea, kicking at drifts of salt crusted leaves as she went, her palm flat against the fronds of marram grass that bristled at her sides. Nan raced ahead, leaving Alys alone with her thoughts. A good word, that – *hambôn*. Her ‘Uwch’ advanced group would lap up such a tidbit of local dialect. It always amused her, the way her advanced students seized upon these morsels of native speech, how hungry they were for markers of authenticity. The best learners seemed to intuit that their assimilation into Welsh speaking society did not depend upon their grasp of formal Welsh but on the specificity of its deviation – mastery of the language meant mastering the *tafodiaith*, the dialect. She pushed the word ‘tafodiaith’ around her mouth, noticing its physicality in the tip of her tongue, the

tap of her teeth, the fold of her lip. A literal gloss: tongue-language. That too, was appealing, the notion that the language of the tongue might be distinct from the language of the mind. Then there was the language of the heart, for though she could never claim Welsh as her mother tongue, it was the language she had chosen, cherished, made her own. If it was not her *mamiath*, she would claim Welsh as her *caloniaith*, the language of her heart. She looked up from the cliff path and found herself at the dry rim of the beach.

Nan chased the breeze as if it were a live thing; racing its currents up the shoreline and into the dunes, leaping between the tufted banks as if it were not fur on her back but feathers. The beach was deserted. Only dog walkers ventured this far round the bay this late in the season. Most of the tourists had left; a few stragglers huddled in the teashop behind the sand dunes where a row of pastel-painted cottages hunkered down against the autumn wind, bracing themselves for winter.

Slowly, deliberately, she recited her half-written poem. It was crap. A thing of form and no feeling. Words so sweet that they stuck to her teeth like toffee. She kicked a mophead of seaweed, pressed the toe of her boot into the wet sand. A shimmering halo sprung up around it, the sand firm until she lifted her foot. Then it collapsed on itself, leaving a sloshy footprint, like a half-baked cake.

She imagined the editor's face as he read the poem, imagined him spitting out his coffee in disgust, exclaiming that this could not have been written by a crowned bard. This drivel, this utter *rwts*. It would be her unmasking.

Drama queen.

She gazed out at the opposite bank of the estuary. The white houses of Glan-y-Fferi looked like teeth in the broad grin of the bay. Sometimes a train would chuff by, bleating out a greeting as it streaked along the shoreline. Not today.

Alys cast her eyes back towards the dunes, vaguely looking for Nan. Instead, standing on the shoreline, about halfway down the beach, she saw a figure. Silhouetted against the honeyed light, it was so still that it might have been an Antony Gormley installation. And then it moved – a playful, flinching movement. Something hung down from the figure’s hand; a dog lead perhaps. Alys glanced around but there was only Nan, a fleck of pepper on the farthest dune.

The figure was staring directly at Alys. She raised a tentative hand, began to stroll towards him. Him? It was hard to tell. Her brain raced through possibilities: definitely not Siôn and not their neighbour, James. As she moved closer, she could make out dark trousers, dark jacket, hood up. Not tall enough to be Rhys from the holiday lets, not broad enough to be Ed. He did not move. Alys picked up pace, brisk with curiosity. It was probably just a tourist. Yes, she could see now, it wasn’t a dog lead in his hand but the strap of a camera and he was still because he was framing a shot. From his position he could capture the sun breaking over the ruins of Llansteffan Castle, the jutting lip of the cliff above the estuary. But no, the long fat barrel of his camera was pointing directly at Alys. She laughed, certain that this was a playful friend, a faux paparazzi having fun at her expense. Meryl at the paper shop had feigned shock when Alys came in for her usual magazines: *I thought you’d have sent a servant now you’ve got your own TV show...*

Alys called out towards the figure.

“Is that you, Huw Teifi?” and then laughing, “Cut it out you bugger, I haven’t got my telly face on!”

She moved towards him, her feet heavy in her boots. There was something familiar in the narrow slope of his shoulders. She hesitated, squinting against the sun’s glare while the sand beneath her heels slowly gave way. She glanced down to see the

toes of her boots sinking beneath the sand slop. It gave her a fleeting sensation of panic. When she looked up, the man was gone.

Arriving back at the cottage, Alys heard the shower running. Nan had worn herself out on the dunes; she coiled into her basket with a quiet huff. Alys shucked off her boots and made her way upstairs towards the sound of the shower, dragging a fingertip across the tops of picture frames as she went. Sun-bleached snaps clung the length of the staircase wall: photos of the farm, of Idris, Hawys, of Siôn and of course Alys; younger, thinner, a shadow of the person she was to become.

The top of the stairs faced Alys' study. It was here, in front of a large sash window, that she kept The Eisteddfod Chair. As she mounted the stairs, The Chair's long, elegant back rose up to greet her, light stretching through its cut out like shards of glass. The pleasure she felt was pure egotism – she knew – and yet, somehow, she felt that she deserved the indulgence. They'd christened it of course, and that too gave her a little thrill each time she saw it; a sense memory inside her, deep and unfurling.

The scent of lime body-wash prickled the air.

In the bedroom, Siôn's navy suit had been packed into a carry bag on the bed. He'd had the ironing board out too; a crisp striped shirt hung from the cornice of the dressing table. The shower pattered out and Alys poked her head through to the ensuite.

"You leaving me again?"

"Ah you're back," said Siôn, stepping out to retrieve his towel. "Bethan called – the meeting's been pulled back to eight thirty so I thought I'd better stay at the flat tonight."

Alys turned towards the bedroom, her mind casting ahead to the evening. She could get some work done; there was that review she'd promised Gwen. Stretching out on the bedspread, she yawned. Perhaps she'd have a bath instead, a read, a glass of something.

"Thought I'd head over to the Bay for a bite to eat with Alun and Eifion," said Siôn, draping his towel on the radiator. He turned to face her then, smiling, naked, mischievous.

"Fancy coming with me?"

Alys wrinkled her nose.

"Pleeease?"

He wagged his cock at her until she snorted with laughter.

"Is that a yes?"

"What about Nan?"

"We'll leave the spare key under the plant pot; Sally and James can let her out later."

Alys groaned.

"I don't know..."

"Suit yourself," Siôn said quietly and in her head, Alys heard the words, "You always do."

Siôn bustled about the bedroom, accruing underwear and jeans, a linen shirt with buttoned back sleeves that showed off his thick forearms. Alys's gaze fell on the glossy box next to the dressing table. The boots inside were black suede with a zip that made her feel sexy. An impulse buy. Siôn had whistled when she showed him. Since then they'd sat boxed up in a corner of the room, untouched.

"Okay, I'll come," she said, suddenly.

Siôn's back straightened, his face brightened.

"Really?"

She nodded. It was the right answer.

Half an hour later she was showered and dressed and fragranced though uncertain about the perfume she'd chosen. The delicate notes seemed too frilly for a woman of her volume. She didn't much care for lotions and potions but it seemed to be an unwritten rule; she'd an obligation on behalf of all big women to smell nice.

As she locked up the cottage, she found herself staring down at the beach, craning her head for a glimpse of strange men with cameras. She'd meant to mention the incident to Siôn but by the time she'd got to the car, her thoughts had turned to poor old Nan, home alone and pining.

"Did you phone James?" she said, climbing into the Mercedes.

"No but it'll be okay – we'll swing by now."

She decided then and there that if the neighbours weren't home then she wasn't going and if Siôn wanted a row then he could have one.

The car pulled up the narrow track and round the corner, where the sign on the gate gleamed, 'Y Cwtch'. Not that anyone local used the name. It'd been 'Tywyn' for as long as anyone could remember. The Tywyn estate had once sprawled the length of the coastline, up the hill as far as the old mansion house. Most of it was Cadw now, or National Trust. When Siôn and Alys first moved in, John Tywyn – a great foghorn of a man – still loomed large on the land. He'd knocked on their kitchen window, offering them some gruff words of welcome and a fistful of garden radishes. They were welcome to make use of the septic tank but they'd be expected to chip in on maintenance costs.

When news of the repossession order was printed in the local paper Alys had been surprised to learn that John Tywyn's family name was plain old Jones. Tywyn, a name scarred into the hills and fields of local memory was no more than a notion. Just as the word suggested, it was a gleaming, a glimmer, something that burned bright for a time and was gone, leaving behind only plain old John Jones.

James and Sally bought the plot at auction, using their rat race cash to revamp the old farmhouse and turn the outbuildings into holiday cottages. Sally's speciality was 'rebranding' and she'd rebranded the place 'Y Cwtch'. She and James had been taking Welsh classes twice a week since their arrival. So pleased was the local community to have incomers who embraced the language that no one had had the heart to tell them about the misspelling.

Alys got out of the car and approached the gate. Sally was already at the back door and came waddling down the garden path to greet them.

"Helô cymdogion!" she said, in her crisp English accent. *Hello neighbours!*

"Helo *gymdogion*," Alys muttered. Tutting at this pendantsry, Siôn waved and smiled before driving down to the courtyard where he could turn the car round. The two women stood on opposite sides of the gate; the misspelled 'cwtch' between them.

"Wel ond wyt ti'n edrych yn braf!" said Alys, "Mae beichiogrwydd yn siwtio ti!"

Sally's face seemed to freeze with a look of mild panic.

"Pregnancy suits you," said Alys.

"Oh, diolch yn fawr! *Thank you*. I know I shouldn't revert to English. James says I've just got to practice, practice, practice but I swear this baby brain business has started already. I can't seem to keep a thought in my head let alone a new language!"

"Paid â phoeni."

Alys felt instantly awkward, for ‘not to worry’ suddenly seemed a rather facile response to Sally’s confession. Alys was never quite sure how she was supposed to respond when women started clucking on about pregnancy and babies. It was not a language she’d learned to speak.

If Sally was offended, she didn’t show it. She had a habit of filling up pauses with prattle, as if conversation were a ball that must not be allowed to fall from the air.

“Ooh I know that one – paid poeni – perhaps I’m not a total lost cause after all!” she said.

Lost cause or not, Alys switched to English. She was not on tutor duty today.

“I was wondering if I could ask you a favour –

“Of course, of course, fire away –”

“We’re heading up to Cardiff tonight and I wondered if you’d mind letting the dog out later –”

“Not a problem at all –”

“And again in the morning if it wouldn’t be too much of an imposition?”

“It would be a pleasure!”

Another of Sally’s habits was to assume the accent of whomever she was speaking to. There was nothing malicious in this tic and yet, hearing her accent parroted back at her, Alys felt painfully self-conscious.

“Diolch yn fawr Sally, ti’n seren,” she said, *you’re a star*, and seeing the car emerge from the courtyard, she made her way towards Siôn. He wound the passenger window down and called out to Sally.

“You’re blooming, Sal!”

“Yeah, blooming fat!” she said, laughing. She blushed then and Alys knew as she climbed into the car that Sally would be mortified later as she recounted the incident to James.

“Do you think Alys was offended?” she’d ask him and James would be expected to say something reassuring about Alys being ‘thick skinned’. He’d make a joke about elephant hides and Sally would laugh guiltily. Yes, Alys could imagine exactly the sort of thing people said about her behind her back. Siôn drove out of the Tywyn, smiling and waving at Sally. Alys kept her eyes on the road.

#

Cardiff Bay bubbled with pedestrians: business people, couples, parents toting their children about long beyond their bedtimes. As Alys and Siôn made their way along Mermaid Quay, a group of young men barrelled by, students most likely, laughing and lairy and reeking of Lynx. One of them mooed in Alys’ direction. She quickened her pace; slid her hand through the crook of Siôn’s arm.

Alun and Eifion had chosen a table by the window. Walking up through the dark, Alys watched their image, lit bright behind glass. Each man stared down at his phone, unaware of his audience, Eifion’s scalp shiny under the spotlights, Alun’s mouth grim with concentration. Eifion wrinkled his nose against the slow slide of his spectacles. It was an ugly habit; she’d teased him about it last time he’d been over. The two had grown quite friendly in the last few months though Alys was under no illusions – it was not so much Alys that Eifion valued, or even her poetry; rather the cultural capital she offered Siôn’s campaign. He spoke of her achievements as if they were part of a shrewd PR campaign. He congratulated her on the television show she presented.

“Just the right balance – ‘classy’ but not ‘snobby’ – something for everyone. But you mustn’t give up the teaching. Shows that you’re still there, at grass roots level, you know? Making a difference in the community.”

She’d tried to tell him, “My career has nothing to do with Siôn’s,” but Eifion scoffed at that.

“Nonsens pwt. It’s all part of the same brand.”

As they entered the restaurant, Eifion’s face flicked up with a smile and Alys wondered which expression was truer – this mask of convivial good humour or the gloom of his face in repose. There was cheek kissing and back patting, small talk about the journey, the waiter came to take their order and then the conversation drifted towards its usual direction – politics. Eifion and Siôn had been hammering out the finer details of a new Welsh language strategy for months now. Tomorrow’s meeting would see it reviewed by the supervisory panel. It was important stuff and yet, Alys couldn’t seem to apply her mind to the conversation. Her gaze kept wandering out towards the curl of the bay. Boat lights danced like fireflies on the surface of the water.

Her fish arrived on a slate platter, decorated with squiggles of sauce. Alys thanked the waiter and glanced at Siôn’s steak; deliciously pink, just the way she liked it. She tried to eke out her slender fillet with small forkfuls as she stared out across the water. Perhaps there were sewin slipping through its currents this very moment. And what else was hiding in the silky darkness? Her mind drifted towards the body in Roedale Park. What if it was someone she knew? What if the discovery rekindled interest in Emma’s case? She never should have posted on that missing persons forum; she ought to delete the post, right now.

“Wyt ti’n cytuno, Alys?”

Alun was staring at her with a curious expression. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to be agreeing with.

"Ti'n iawn?" said Siôn, a note of irritation in his voice. *You all right?*

"Sori, I –"

Just then, her phone began to trill in her bag. Relieved at the intrusion, Alys picked it up with an apologetic smile. The display read 'adre' – her own home phone number.

"Alys?" said the voice on the line, "It's Sally. Listen, I'm really sorry to bother you–"

"– Is Nan okay?"

"She's fine, don't worry."

"It's just that I wasn't expecting anyone to be in the cottage and I got such a fright and now my waters have broken!"

"Iesgob! Wyt ti'n iawn – *are you okay?*"

"Yes, yes, everything's fine. We're on our way to the hospital now. I just thought I should let you know... I'm really sorry about the rug in the living room."

"Don't worry about that –"

"– Your sister is cleaning it up."

"My sister?"

"Yes she's been brilliant – she'd come to surprise you and I'm afraid I totally ruined her surprise as well as the rug! Anyway, she promised to look after everything so we could get off to the hospital."

"Sally, I don't have a sister."

There was a wail on the other end of the line.

“Sally? Listen, Sally, don’t panic, we’ll sort this out. You focus on the baby and I’ll call the police.”

She couldn’t make out what Sally was saying though her sobs. In the end, James took up the phone, his voice shrill with accusation.

“Look she said she was your sister, she knew all kinds of stuff about you. She was the one who came to get me. You know, she could’ve just done a runner. You can’t blame us for –”

“– I’m not blaming you James, I’m just saying we’ve got to call the police.”

And as she said the words, the man on the beach flashed into her mind. The slight build, the spring of his gait – perhaps it hadn’t been a man at all.

Roedale, 2015.

It was strange to be back in the graveyard. For years, Kate had passed St Stephen's, ferrying Jade to and fro from school but she'd had no reason to go inside. She eyed the maintenance hut as she stepped through the gate, her hand in the fold of Lawrence's arm.

"We used to play in there," she said and he wrinkled his chin.

"Morbid."

"I suppose it was."

There was a sturdier door on the hut now, a shiny new lock.

They joined the procession of mourners on the path towards the church. A breeze swept up the mulched borders, a damp, mushroomy smell masked by drifting plumes of perfume. The line was mostly ladies from the Golf club, friends from church, a modest number but well turned out.

Kate kept her head down. Halfway down the path, she stepped into the shadow of an ornamental angel, wings spread for clemency. The dimmed light struck a memory in Kate: sitting on the rim of a grave, her fingertips raking through glass chippings. A green shard held up to the sun - Kryptonite! There was something else too, pushing through the cloud of lost thoughts. It came to her in a bolt that shocked her hand and made her turn from her husband suddenly, almost knocking into Clementine.

"What is it?"

"I just want to see if - "

She stepped onto the grass, heels sinking like nails into the turf as she scanned the graves for a name.

“There you are,” she said at last, crouching at a grave two plots down from the angel. It was smaller than she remembered, half sunk into the grass. The name was almost hidden behind a patina of frilly lichen: Beatrice Drake, born 1879. Went to sleep 1890. The unlikely heroine of many an adventure conjured on this very spot. She was a scullery maid but really an heiress, a girl dressed up as a boy, a seamstress who slipped through a stitch in time. Always a disguise, always a daring escape. Even then, Emma was writing a way out of her life. Beatrice. The name lingered in her thoughts, a connection waiting to be made.

“What is it?” said Lawrence.

He’d picked his way through the graves to find her.

“Nothing. Just... something we used to do as kids. Make up stories about this dead girl.”

“You were a weird kid, Kate.”

She punched him playfully on the arm.

“Better weird than boring.”

Clementine was waiting for them at the entrance to the church, her lips twitching with irritation. Her sudden weight loss gave her face a new hardness. Or perhaps it had always been there, hidden behind the bounce of her cheeks.

“Come on, you’ll make us late,” she said. Then, tutting at Kate’s shoes, “You’d better wipe those”. She produced a tissue from her handbag. Kate’s heels had speared a shoal of sodden leaves. She brushed them off and they littered the ground like decaying confetti.

The minister was new. She hadn’t known the deceased personally but Sybil’s reputation preceded her. A private, upstanding woman, a person of unerring faith, she had been

married in this very church. Kate watched Clive's suited back. She wondered if he would flinch at the mention of marriage. He didn't appear to hear. He was whispering something to Linda, who in turn was shushing Sammy. From her handbag, Linda brought out a tupperware box and offered the child a sandwich – a picnic at a funeral.

Kate's eyes skimmed the backs of the heads in the front pew: a balding cousin perhaps, a silvery aunt and seated at the end of the row, a woman with a neat bob, shaped into the nape of her neck. Kate watched her manicured hand scooping hair behind her ear. The curve of her cheek was a young Sybil, the bow of her lips was Emma.

Kate pulled her gaze away, dug her fingernails into her palms. *Breathe*. There would be a perfectly sensible explanation. Things were improving between she and Lawrence; she couldn't afford to spoil it. Still, her heart was a fledgling, flapping on the brink. She willed the service to end so the wake could begin. She would have to talk to this woman, to make certain she wasn't Emma.

The function room of Roedale Golf Club twinkled with the remains of a wedding. Vines of fairy lights clung to the pillars, the chairs were satin-bowed. It gave the wake a strangely celebratory mood. The buffet table was bookended with an austentatious spray of lilies – the sight of which would have made Sybil shudder, Kate thought. Among the vol-au-vents and paté and crudités, someone had made a lemon meringue pie – one of the ladies from the club perhaps, intending a thoughtful gesture. It seemed to Kate a tragic monument to Sybil's life: the best that anyone could say about Sybil was that she knew how to bake a cake.

“Kate!”

She turned round to see Clive, brandishing a celery stick and a glass of fizz.

“Glad you could make it,” he said, hoovering up a dollop of sour cream.

“Of course,” said Kate.

“Would you like some bubbly? I’ve laid on a couple of bottles but after that you’ll have to get that husband of yours to open his wallet.”

“I can pay for my own drinks thanks,” she said.

He took a sip from his glass and rolled back on his heels.

“Lovely service I thought.”

Kate cocked her head on one side. All things bright and beautiful. Corinthians. Jerusalem. Cut and paste. It couldn’t have been less personal if he’d tried. Kate would have liked to read a poem but she hadn’t been asked. Neither had she been permitted to say goodbye to Sybil at the interment. The service programme read ‘family only’. Still, she kept her thoughts to herself and Clive blundered on.

“I don’t know why the old girl wanted a burial,” he said, “a cremation would have been more apt – she’d already started the job!”

His downturned mouth hung open like an outrageous puppet.

“Oh come on, you’ve got to laugh!” he said.

Kate wondered how long he’d been practicing that line. How many people today he’d try it out on. She turned her back on him and went in search of Lawrence and Clementine. Lawrence was deep in conversation with a colleague from the council. Clementine was by the bar, talking to the lady with the bob. It was obvious now who she was. Kate recognised the shy stoop, the deep-set eyes.

“Kate!” said Clementine, “Come and meet Danni.”

#

Danni made an attractive woman. Slender and elegant, she held herself with all the confidence she'd lacked in her teenage years. Close up, there were tell-tale signs: something in the spread of her shoulders, and though she disguised it with a floral scarf, there remained a knuckle of cartilage at her throat. Despite these details, she appeared to inhabit her body to the full, in a way that Kate envied.

The accent was less convincing; a honeyed West coast caricature that couldn't be real, surely?

"I tried, you know?" she said, "I wrote Sybil postcards. I sent her flowers on the anniversary."

"Sorry – what?" said Kate.

"I sent her flowers every year - just to let her know I was thinking of her."

"That was you?"

"Sure... until the manager at the nursing home told me to stop."

"Right. That makes sense."

Janice had come to the funeral but not to the wake. Kate caught her eye on the way out of the church and they had nodded at one another. It was strange to think that they'd seen each other every week for the past ten years, and now they would probably never see one another again.

"Are you staying at your Dad's?" Clementine asked.

A line appeared between Danni's eyebrows, her mouth gaped an exaggerated,

"Noooo. I'm staying at The Travelodge."

"Have you spoken to him?" Kate asked.

Danni smiled, her eyes popped wide. "We've said hello."

"I see," said Kate, "And how long are you here for?"

"Actually, I fly home tonight."

Kate noticed the word 'home' and wondered what it meant to Danni, if it were a place or merely an idea; something she could carry across the world with her and unpack at her destination of choice. Roedale was the only home Kate could ever imagine; it probably made her horribly parochial.

"I've got to travel tonight," said Danni, "because I'm getting married on Saturday."

"Congratulations!" said Clementine, "That's lovely news."

"So you and Craig are finally going to tie the knot," said Kate.

"Craig? God no. We broke up a long time ago... before I transitioned."

"Oh."

"Anyway, Pete. His name's Pete, he's a lawyer and the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Well that's great. Are Clive and Linda...?"

Danni let out a high-pitched hoot.

"As if."

She turned then to Kate, as if she had been waiting for this opportune moment, to ask a favour.

"So here's the thing. The manager at the nursing home -"

"Janice?"

"Yeah. She gave me a box of Mum's things. Junk mostly, but I thought you might want to have a look through, see if there's anything you want."

"That's very kind of you."

"It's on the back seat of my rental. Shall we go out to the car park and I can transfer it to your trunk?"

Danni said her farewells and the pair of them made their way over the plush carpet, through the heavy double doors, ignoring the furtive glances of the respectable people they passed.

Outside in the car park, a wind had got up, Kate pulled her black raincoat around herself, and found a moist rosette on the bodice of her dress. She had agreed to wean Bobby, but her body hadn't signed up to the deal. She wondered how Jade was getting on, babysitting. Perhaps she'd use them as an excuse to leave the wake early.

"It was really sweet of you to visit Sybil every week," said Danni.

Kate shrugged, nothing to say but, "Well."

"You're the only one who took an interest in her really. That's why I thought of you, when they gave me her stuff."

Opening the boot of her Subaru, she reached in and handed Kate a box that had once contained a pair of orthopaedic shoes.

"Here it is," she said.

It seemed so pathetic, a woman's life reduced to the contents of a shoebox. Kate tucked it under her arm and said an awkward "Thanks."

"I'm gonna head off now," said Danni.

"Yes of course, well, perhaps we'll see each other again in a few weeks. There'll be a funeral, won't there? Once the police have formalised things."

Danni put a hand to her throat.

"What do you mean?"

"Emma."

"Oh," said Danni, "Of course, you won't have heard."

She took a step towards Kate, lowered her voice to a crackle.

“I’m not supposed to say anything until the press conference but what the hell. You have as much right to know as anyone. I had a call from DCI Blakey yesterday. They’ve identified the body in the park. It’s not her.”

Kate blinked, assumed she had misunderstood.

“A teenage girl, they said.”

“That’s right, but it’s not Emma.”

“Who then?”

“It’s that girl who went missing around the same time – a model I think? It was all over the papers. Carrie... no, Karen...”

“Karen Banks.”

“That’s the one.”

As Kate absorbed this information, she felt a twist of pain in her chest. She had resigned herself to Emma’s death; had even been quietly grateful for it.

“Karen Banks...” said Kate. “I could never understand why the media were interested in *her* but not Emma.”

Danni shrugged. “Well it didn’t help, I suppose that Clive and Sybil wouldn’t play ball. You’ve got to throw the media a bone in these situations... pardon the expression.”

Kate could not pardon it; it was obscene, the idea that the failure to find Emma was down to poor marketing. It sounded like something Clive would say.

“She was wily,” said Danni, a snide twist on her lips.

“Who?”

“Emma. Wouldn’t surprise me if she was watching it all play out, enjoying the drama.”

“Wow,” said Kate. “You really hated her.”

Danni’s face was a pantomime of shock.

“Why would you say that? She was my baby sister, I loved her dearly.”

And though she apologised, Kate felt that she had seen Danni in that moment. When the mask slipped, she wasn't all that different from her father. As if to protest the point, Danni gushed on about her sister,

“She was so smart, way smarter than me. It's not surprising our parents adored her. They just couldn't stand her growing up. Clive wanted her all to himself. I probably shoulda helped her but I had my own shit going on. I mean they fucking *hated* me –”

Kate opened the boot of her Volkswagen and placed the box in amongst the wellies and shopping bags, the detritus of family life.

“It's okay, Danni, you don't need to explain.”

“Well anyway. If Emma is alive, I say good for her. She got out. We both did.”

Kate closed the door of the boot and wished Danni a safe journey. She thought about what Danni had said, long after they had gone their separate ways but she forgot all about Sybil's sad little box of possessions, rattling around in the boot, waiting to be remembered.

#

Four weeks after Sybil's funeral, life at The Laurels began to shape itself into a new normality. Clementine returned home, Jade went off to university in Swansea and Kate returned to work. Some mornings, in the minutes between Lawrence taking Bobby to nursery and Kate leaving for work, when she was rushing to find her keys, or broly or jacket, she would stop for a moment, and stand in the silence. The house felt like a shell; she was glad to leave it.

It felt good to return to the world. Kate hoped that the distraction of work might keep her away from the missing person chat rooms, away from the spectre of Emma.

Her first day back at The Advertiser was an education. She was invited in to the editor's office for what she thought was an informal 'welcome back' chat. Barbara Grey sat at her formica desk, chewing a nicotine gum and smiling her tobacco-stained teeth and somewhere between asking to see a photo of Bobby and enquiring how Jade was getting on at uni, she announced that Kate's contracted hours had been reduced.

"I expect that will suit you better, now you're back in baby mode."

Kate found herself agreeably nodding her head, as if she were accepting a favour rather than a demotion. She was told that her old desk was no longer *her* desk – there was a new 'hot-seating' policy. It didn't apply to the ad sales staff of course, or to Barbara herself, but Kate, Salim and Tim were expected to be 'flexible'. Apparently it encouraged creative thinking. Barbara had been on a management course.

It didn't take Kate long to work out that the boy who'd been hired to cover her maternity leave had been taken on as permanent staff. She'd met him on one of her 'keeping in touch' days – Tim Scranton. He was pleasant enough, for a quiff-haired, beard-tweaking fashion victim. He couldn't be more than twenty-three and though he had a first-class media degree, he churned out stories too quickly for Kate's liking. She'd logged in to the shared drive and read some of his half-hashed articles on the body in the park – Tim had been given the biggest scoop of the year. Kate suspected a lack of scrupulousness in his fact checking. She suspected too that he was being paid more than her. She'd overheard Barbara on the phone to HR: "If we want the young talent to stay, our incentives must be competitive."

Kate spent her first morning back at work tarting up press releases from the council: *Target set for 30,000 potholes to be blitzed in three months*. It was slightly depressing how little had changed in the nine months she'd been away; Surrey's obsession with potholes continued to make copy.

By lunchtime she'd uploaded the pieces Barbara had asked for and updated the social media accounts. The office was quiet; Salim was out at county court and Tim was down at police HQ, chasing a lead on the Karen Banks story. Kate sat at her hot-desk, staring at the clock and wondering if Bobby was missing her. She logged in to the nursery's online feed; watched on the nursery's CCTV cameras as another woman cradled him in her arms, lay him down for a nap. Sometimes when Kate pressed her nose against his downy head at night, she could smell the other woman on him, her perfume rising up from the warm folds of his neck. Perhaps he'd be emotionally scarred by her absence, grow up to murder girls and bury their bodies in the park.

Karen Banks was a boon to the paper. There had been a marked improvement in print sales and each drip of new information kept the story – and the paper – running. Kate wondered what new angle Tim was working on. She logged in to the shared drive and poked around his files. There were lists of quotes and notes from off the record conversations. He must have travelled to Oxfordshire to doorstep the family. That sort of thing was above and beyond The Advertiser's usual remit and Kate wondered if Barbara knew about it.

Kate scrolled through Tim's notes, picking out tidbits; a conversation with 'Lydia'. A school friend perhaps? She couldn't make out Tim's shorthand. He seemed to type in text speak, leaving out the vowels. From what she could piece together, Lydia had covered for Karen so that she could meet a TV producer in London. The word 'Eastenders' and a question mark. Where was the advert placed? Tim had checked The Stage, and all the Classifieds. There were digital back copies of almost everything. No match. She scanned back over Tim's notes, a quote from Lydia:

“I don’t remember what it was called. Karen took the advert with her. It wasn’t a newspaper though. It looked kind of homemade. A4 card. Red with black print. Stapled in the corner.”

Kate narrowed her eyes, an ache of uneasiness in her chest. It wouldn’t mean anything to Tim; he was too young to remember the pre-digital world but Kate knew exactly what Lydia was talking about. It was an old fashioned casting call out – PCR: Production and Casting Report. She knew, because Terry had had a subscription. He’d brought it along to drama club and urged she and Emma to audition for Eastenders.

“I’ll drive you to London myself,” he’d said. “You could both be stars. Maybe we could catch a show while we’re up there. Phantom or Les Mis...”

Kate said Clementine would never allow her to go.

Goosebumps rippled over her skin as she recalled his words:

“We don’t have to tell your parents. You could say you’re going to Emma’s house and Emma could say she’s going to your place. They’ll forgive you the fib once you’re famous.”

Llansteffan, South Wales, 10th October 2015.

Alun and Eifion were very understanding. Eifion promised that rescheduling the meeting would not be a problem. Alun insisted on picking up the bill for dinner.

“Go, go go,” he’d said, shooing Alys and Siôn out into the night with a flick of his blunt fingers, “Make sure you call us later to let us know you’re alright.”

“Will do,” said Siôn.

Alys was already through the door, her phone cradled in the palm of her hand, thumb hovering over the number nine.

“If you phone the police now, then they’ll arrive before we do,” said Siôn.

“Does it matter?” said Alys, “What have we got to hide?”

As they walked in silence to the car, the question lingered between them, unanswered.

#

The police car was fluorescent yellow, lit up by a lurid blue light. It looked unnatural and out of place, parked outside the cottage. The officer too, was unfamiliar; a small man in a bulky vest and a peaked cap. He stretched out a hand to greet them as they made their way up the drive.

“Mr and Mrs Protheroe?” he said in English, “Officer Pete Jennings, South Wales Police. My partner is giving the property the once over but it looks to be secure.”

“Right. Thanks,” said Siôn, shaking the officer’s hand.

“Hang on,” said Alys, “You mean, the intruder locked up after herself?”

“Looks like it.”

A woman officer came striding towards them from the back of the house, torch streaming so that Alys had to shield her eyes from its glare.

“No sign of a break in round the back,” she said and something in her accent made Alys switch to Welsh.

“Well i ni fynd mewn te, yfe?” *We’d better go inside.*

The sound of Siôn’s key in the lock sent Nan scuttling down the hall towards them, tail swishing in anticipation. Siôn gave her a brusque scrub before tugging her out of the narrow passageway and into the porch. Alys’ instincts were right; the woman officer addressed her in Welsh.

“You’d better wait here while Officer Jennings and I take a look around.”

Siôn held Alys against his chest as they waited in the porch, listening to the officers’ footsteps clumping through the house, their muted voices, the click of switches. Gradually, the house was illuminated; Alys wondered who might be outside, watching the show. She stared at the window but the darkness made a mirror of the glass; she could see nothing but herself.

After a time, Jennings came to fetch them.

“Whoever was here has gone but there are no visible signs of a break in. Is it possible that you might have forgotten to lock up?”

“No. I’m sure I locked the door. I know I did,” said Alys.

“Do you keep a spare key anywhere outside?”

“Well, yes.”

“Perhaps someone might have seen where you keep it?”

“You mean that someone might have been watching us?”

“You are in the public eye Mr Protheroe – an Assembly Member. It’s possible that there is a political motive at play here.”

"I'll see if the key's been moved," said Siôn.

Sure enough, it was not beneath the bay tree in the porch.

"We'll have to get the locks changed."

"I can get you the number for an emergency locksmith," said Jennings, "In the meantime, we'll need you to take a look around and see if anything's been stolen."

While the others steamed ahead, Alys moved with the torpor of defeat.

Downstairs, everything appeared to be in order: paintings remained in their places, books lay undisturbed on the shelves, the poetry collection she had been reading that morning lay on the coffee table just as she'd left it, spine cracked open, face down to the glass. Nothing appeared to be out of place and yet, she felt as if she were walking through wreckage.

The rug that normally lay on the living room floor was draped across the radiator. Drips from its tasselled corner had pooled on the floorboards. Nan lapped at the puddle until Siôn pulled her sharply away.

"Did you put that rug there?" said Jennings.

"No. Sally – the neighbour – but it's fine," said Alys.

Jennings' gaze peeled around the room, landing back with Nan.

"Not much of a guard dog, is she?" he said, smiling.

"I suppose not," said Siôn.

"Well nothing seems to be missing from this room," said Alys, "shall we move on?"

"All right then," said Jennings, "Let's go upstairs. Officer Willis is checking all the window locks."

As she trudged up the stairs, Alys was relieved to see The Chair slide into view; they'd have had a job stealing that. Between The Chair and the window, Officer Willis was standing on her tiptoes, reaching up to rattle the window lock.

"All looks secure," she said, "just this one I can't quite get to."

Eager to please, Jennings bounded over, though he was several inches shorter than her.

"Here, let me," he said, and placing one fat rubber soled boot on the seat of The Chair, he levered himself up to check the lock. It was over in an instant but the tension in the air snapped like a whipcrack.

"Get down from there!" Willis hissed, turning quickly to Siôn and Alys, "Mae'n flin 'da fi, *I'm so sorry*. He didn't –"

She brushed crumbs of mud from the seat and glared at her partner. Jennings stood awkwardly on the cream carpet, shifting his weight from right foot to left.

"Sorry, I didn't think –"

"You never do..." Willis muttered in Welsh.

Siôn took pity on the man.

"It's an Eisteddfod Chair," he said, "It's like an Oscar... for Welsh poetry."

"And you just stomped your muddy boots all over it," said Willis.

Jennings looked around uncertainly.

"Sorry."

Alys inspected The Chair. She ran her fingers over the smooth wedge of its base, up the broad back to the swirl of light at its apex.

"Wonderful craftsmanship..." said Willis.

Alys straightened up.

"Yes. She's a beauty isn't she? Would you like to...?"

Willis blushed and Alys felt suddenly ashamed. It was only a chair after all. There was an awkward moment in which neither woman knew how to respond politely, without offending the other.

“Oh I couldn’t – ”

“No, it’s fine.”

In the end, Jennings plumped down on The Chair, nestling in as if he were brooding a clutch of eggs.

“Surprisingly comfortable,” he said.

There was something so incongruous about his sitting there that Alys laughed out loud, a bright sound that swept the air of tension. Latching on to the change in mood, Jennings struck a pose to incite more laughter and in that moment, all was well. But as her head arched back in amusement, something snagged Alys’s attention. Through the doorway of her study, she caught a glimpse of dangling pink, the shade of entrails. She opened her mouth to say something but the moment passed. Officer Willis turned in the opposite direction, saying, “We’d better have a look in the bedroom.” Siôn and Jennings went after her.

Alys stood motionless on the landing, staring through the crack of her study door. Something bulky and unfamiliar lay on her desk – a parcel perhaps. Gently nudging the door open, Alys stepped into her study and stared at the package. It was a wad of letters, curled up at the edges and bound with the kind of ribbon that belongs on a ballet shoe. The envelope at the top of the stack bore her name, in jagged capitals: Alys Protheroe. But beside it, bracketed, and in an old-fashioned hand, someone had penned a different name: Emma.

Alys hesitated, her fingers spidering in the air above the package. If she was going to call out to the police officers, then now was the time. She could hear them

talking across the hall. They were inspecting Siôn's Augustus John; a nameless 'gypsy girl' that Alys endured for his sake. It was her namelessness that offended Alys. If the girl was worth painting, didn't she deserve her own name?

She opened her mouth and took a breath. Then she opened the drawer of the desk and with a swift motion of her forearm, swept the bundle inside.

Siôn called out to her from the other room.

"Alys? Wyt ti'n dod?" *Are you coming?*

Her heart quickened. She slid the drawer shut. Her throat felt tight and her voice came out high and strangled.

"Just coming!"

The words sounded wrong, as if they did not belong to her and she realised then, that she had spoken them in English.

It was one in the morning by the time the police left. The locksmith had been and gone and Alys was lying in bed, staring at her new front door key. It lay on her bedside table, glowing a brassy shade of orange in the lamplight.

She couldn't sleep. Her mind kept wandering next door to her study, to the package in the drawer of her desk. She'd deal with it tomorrow. Siôn would be out all day – there was the rescheduled meeting in the morning and an education conference in the afternoon. She'd have the house to herself. She'd already contacted Buddug at the college and cancelled her own responsibilities. Monday was a light day anyway; there was only the intermediate group. She'd planned a session on grammar and was almost sorry to miss it. She enjoyed lifting up the bonnet of language, revealing the structures that held things in place, the nuts and bolts that made meaning from chaos. Still, Huw was more than capable of introducing her students to 'y goddefol' *the passive voice*.

Alys's house was broken into.

Alys was not harmed.

An object was left on Alys' desk.

Subject: unknown.

Ceri Rampart's sharp little face pricked Alys's thoughts. She found herself imitating that smile, her tongue tip pressed against the back of her top teeth, the girlish glee in it. She couldn't prove it was Ceri of course but who else could it be? Ceri was the only person ever to question Alys's story. Plus, she had access to the 'Celf Cymru' production office – she worked in the same building. Alys felt a jab of anger towards Heulwen, the show's Producer. Why hadn't she done as Alys asked and shredded the letters? She pictured Ceri on the 'Heno' sofa: *"I've known 'Alys' for years... at least, I thought I did... but all the while she was lying to me... lying to us all. I always suspected something wasn't right... it only took a bit of digging, the skills of an investigative journalist..."*

"You awake?" said Siôn. He stretched a langorous arm over Alys's hip, working his hand up the folds of her flesh until he found a breast.

"That depends..." she said.

He pressed himself against the small of her back, trailing his lips along the curve of her shoulder, the nape of her neck.

"On what?"

"If you want to talk..."

He held the weight of her breast in his palm.

"I don't want to talk," he said, and she rolled round to kiss him, taking his face in her hands.

"Good," she said, "Neither do I."

M4, 9th October 2015.

As Kate sat in the traffic of the M4, the motorway seemed to her a fat grey vein pumping her from the heart of London into the back of Wales. The great H of the Severn Bridge taunted her from the distance and she felt an unreasonable resentment for the place; not only had it taken Jade far from home, but it made Kate pay a toll for the privilege of visiting her. She raked a finger through the little drawer in which she kept loose change, and the river caught her eye, a sheet of glimmering pewter, catching scraps of light on its surface, bearing them away on subtle currents.

A car horn blared beside her. Eyes on the road Kate, eyes on the road. Her gaze flicked, in parental reflex, towards the vacant baby seat in her rear view mirror. She could not remember the last time she had driven anywhere alone. When Jade first suggested a weekend without the baby, Kate had balked at the idea. But after all, Bobby was weaned now, Lawrence was perfectly capable of caring for him and there was something else too, something in the timbre of Jade's voice.

"It's not that I don't want to see Lol and Bobby but I thought we could have a girly weekend," she'd said, "some mother-daughter time."

As Kate drove onto the bridge, its cables sprang up like laser beams, trapping her inside an optical illusion. She had a sensation of being sucked into their channel, propelled through time and space, spat out at the other end – in Wales.

Flying above the Severn Estuary, the car filled with the reek of eggs. Port Talbot strobed past the window, a single blue flame flickering in the wind. Not far now. It had been a better journey than the one they'd made six weeks before, at the start of term. Both the traffic and the rain had been relentless. Then, when they'd finally arrived at Preseli halls

of residence, the ugly brown tower block did not live up to the pastoral promise of its name. Jade remained optimistic.

“At least my room has a window,” she’d said.

The view from that window was glum and rain-stained: hulking brutalist buildings, choked city roads and a hospital. But Jade saw something beyond them.

“Singleton Park,” she’d said, her finger stabbing at a sludgy streak of green. “I bet it’s lovely there in summer,” and Lawrence had replied, “Do they have summer in Wales?”

The University tower came into view and Kate felt a kick of trepidation in her tummy, a sixth sense about what was coming. Jade kept mentioning on the phone, a friend she’d made, a girl whose name Kate struggled to pronounce.

“No, Mum, it’s not Lowry like the painter it’s *Low* – as in, the opposite of high – and ‘ri’ – rhymes with ‘tea’. Lowri.”

It was inordinately important to Jade that Kate got this right. She wasn’t entirely surprised then, when she pulled up outside Preseli Halls and saw Jade lolling in the entranceway, her arms laced through those of a tall, slender girl. Kate tooted her car horn and the girls jumped apart, giggling as they made their way down to the car park, toting rucksacks and a guitar.

Kate climbed out of the car and wrapped her daughter in a hug. She had to reach up to Jade these days and was nearly whisked off her tiptoes. They stumbled apart, laughing, and Kate studied Jade’s face for changes. She had tamed her flossy hair into a bun, wrapped her neck in a scarf Kate hadn’t seen before, but otherwise, she looked the same.

The other girl stood apart from them, twisting her toe tip into the tarmac. She was dressed in slouchy jeans and a bright yellow hoody, but her face was lean and elegant: high cheekbones and a straight jaw framed by a springy afro.

“You must be Lowri,” said Kate, taking care with the pronunciation.

The girl beamed and offered her hand to shake, but Kate swooped her into a hug.

“It’s so lovely to meet you at last,” she said, “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Jade looked pleased with her mother’s performance and taking her hands in her own, she said, “Lowri’s going home for the weekend and her parents have invited us all for lunch. Can we go Mum? Please?”

Kate agreed that of course they could go, and yes, she would drive, and as she smiled and popped open the boot for their bags, she hoped Jade didn’t sense the wilt of her disappointment. So much for their mother-daughter time. From now on she’d have to share Jade. Loving her, meant letting her go.

“What’s this cardboard box in the boot, Mum?” said Jade.

She was leaning inside, rearranging Kate’s bulky professional camera, trying to make room for Lowri’s guitar.

“What box?”

And there it was – as prosaic as an empty shoebox – all that remained of Sybil. A lance of guilt. Kate had barely thought of Sybil since the funeral. Her death had forced Kate to admit the truth about her nursing home visits. They’d had little to do with Sybil, and everything to do with Kate’s preoccupation with Emma. She had been reaching for a connection that could not be made.

Instead of sharing this revelation with Clementine, Kate had turned to Lawrence. They had spent long hours talking, not in the den, but in the bright sun-lit kitchen.

Opening up to her husband, Kate had breathed fresh air into the relationship; a fragile new intimacy had sprung up between them. Where Clementine had been cossetting, Lawrence was frank. It was time to move on, he said. No good could come from picking at the scab of the past, it was time to lay Emma's ghost to rest. Kate had agreed to try. She might even have succeeded, if Jade hadn't stumbled upon Sybil's shoe box.

"It's nothing really," said Kate, "just a few bits and bobs from Sybil. Stick it on the back seat if there's no room in the boot."

The girls climbed into the car with lissom ease, their lean bodies bending like saplings and Kate realised that she would be sitting up front alone; the taxi driver. She plonked herself in the driving seat, and spoke to Lowri's reflection in the rear view mirror.

"Where are we going then?"

"If you put SA31 into the sat-nav, I can guide you once we get to Carmarthen."

"Carmarthen. Okay. Let me just..."

She typed in the postcode and the girls began cackling in the back. When she looked up, Jade was sporting a plum coloured beret, pitched at a jaunty angle, her fingers webbed with a string of pearls. Lowri tugged on a pair of buff kid gloves.

"These are lush..." she said and Jade cried out in her poshest voice,

"Simply divine!"

Kate smiled, and issued them a feeble reprimand.

"A bit of respect please girls. The woman's dead after all..."

"She won't need these then will she?" said Jade, clamping a pair of peridots onto her earlobes.

"Those are gorgeous!" said Lowri.

As Kate started the car and drove out of the forecourt, she caught the faintest whiff of Sybil's perfume rising up like a spirit from its cardboard coffin.

"Why have you got Sybil's stuff anyway?" said Jade.

"No one else wanted it."

"That's sad," said Lowri. "Who was she?"

"Ahh... it's a long story," said Kate, in no mood to sour the journey.

She pulled out onto the campus road and followed it up the steep hill, past teetering rows of terraced houses banked up along the edge of the park. The girls murmured in the back seat. She guessed that Jade was giving Lowri a potted history of the past. As they joined the flow of traffic headed west, the sea seemed to wink at them through the trees.

"Seriously, that is weird," said Jade.

"What's weird?" Kate replied.

"Have you looked through this stuff?"

"No. Why?"

"Was Sybil Welsh?" Lowri asked.

"No."

"What's she doing with a bunch of press photos of Alys Protheroe?"

"Who?"

"She's a TV presenter on S4C," said Lowri. "Well, a poet really – but she presents the culture show."

"Oh, that..." said Kate. "Yes, Sybil got a bit confused by the end... fixated on this – what did you say her name was?"

"Alys Protheroe. We're studying her in my Welsh lit class. She wrote 'Esgyrn y Ferch ar Goll'".

“What the heck is that?”

“It’s this epic poem about a ghost who’s stuck in the body of a bird. She’s cared for by a sorceress who feeds her words. In the end, they build a new body and the ghost gets to live again.”

“Sounds shit,” said Jade.

Kate laughed and even Lowri had to smile.

“It’s mythological... kind of a riff on Rhiannon’s birds from the Mabinogi.”

“The mabby wotty?” said Kate.

“Come on. You must have heard of the Mabinogi? They’re a collection of folk tales – the oldest in Britain. Giants and shape-shifters – way better than Game of Thrones.”

The conversation drifted towards the TV show and whether or not it was as good as the books and though she chipped in with the occasional comment, Kate’s mind was drawn towards the woman in the box, the face smiling out of that photograph. It had unleashed a feeling within her, something she would like to call curiosity but which was closer to something altogether more dangerous; a delicate skein of hope.

They weren’t far from Carmarthen when Jade insisted they stop off at a service station. Jade hated using the loo at friends’ houses, she’d made herself ill with it as a child. Kate wouldn’t say this in front of Lowri. Instead, she caught Jade’s eye in the rear-view mirror and said,

“Perhaps you could run in and get some flowers and a bottle of wine for us to take to lunch?”

“Good idea,” said Jade as Kate pulled in at Cross Hands. She parked the car and handed Jade a crisp twenty pound note.

“Aren’t you coming in too?” Jade asked.

“I’ve just got to make a phone call,” said Kate, “for work,” and as the girls loped off towards the services, Kate leant into the back seat and scooped up Sybil’s shoe box. The remaining contents were a near-empty bottle of Chanel No.5 and a bundle of letters, trussed up with a tatty pink ribbon. She pulled out the press picture of Alys Protheroe and held it close to her face. It couldn’t be Emma. This ‘Alys’ was built on a different scale; she had a fulsome heft that Emma would have abhorred. She’d hated fat people. Or perhaps that was Sybil: *A moment on the lips my dear...*

Still, something about the shape of her mouth brought to mind Danni and then there were the eyes, grey as a winter sea.

All her good sense told her that she was being ridiculous and yet, she found herself reaching in her handbag for her smartphone, typing ‘Alys Protheroe’ into Google.

There were pictures of Alys and articles about her but it was all unreachable, bricked up behind the wall of a language Kate didn’t speak. There was a BBC article about a ceremony of some sort and beside it, three magic words: Translate this page. She clicked on the link and read:

Alys Protheroe of Llansteffan wins Car in Carmarthenshire Eisteddfod.

A car? Could that be right? She read on:

The chair was presented for a sequence of poems in a complete cynghanedd of up to 250 lines under the title ‘Rebirth’.

Even in English, it didn’t make sense. Did she win a car or a chair? Neither one sounded likely and what on earth was a ‘complete cynghanedd’? It sounded like an insult. *You complete and utter sign-ger-ned.*

She searched for Alys Protheroe on social media. Nothing. There was however an Alys Protheroe mentioned in a year-old tweet. Kate clicked on the tweeter’s profile: *Ceri*

Rampart. Broadcast journalist. Currently at BBCWales. Another click and a video popped up.

Alys Protheroe: clammy under studio lights, perched awkwardly on the edge of a red sofa, rearranging the folds of her white gown. Without subtitles, the interview was a riddle of foreign sounds so that when she heard a word of English, it rang out, clear as tapped glass – Beatrice. It was the name on the gravestone at St Stephen’s; the heroine of Emma’s childhood stories. A coincidence, surely. Still, Kate’s mind tugged at the thread of connection. She’d read it somewhere else, recently, but where? The words came to her, before the name: *Maybe she doesn’t want to be found.*

Heart pumping hard, Kate looked up and out across the parking lot. Lowri’s yellow hoody glowed through the dim doorway of the service station shop. Jade was standing beside her, choosing flowers from a row of black buckets. And though Kate was looking right at them, she barely saw them at all, for her mind was reeling ahead, her breath balled up in her belly. She felt dizzy. She knew she ought to get out of the car and stretch her legs but instead, she picked up the press photo of Alys Protheroe. Underneath the picture were the contact details for the production company: an address in Cardiff, a telephone number. She dialled it.

The line rang in long drills. She drummed her nails on the steering wheel, stared at a straggle of smokers, leaning against the service station wall, a chained dog sniffing at the stinky slits of the drain.

No one picked up the phone.

She thought guiltily of Lawrence. *Put it behind you. Move on.*

Jade was waving at her through the glass of the service station shop, clutching a bunch of yellow roses. She gave Jade a thumbs up and smiled. The queue for the checkout was long.

Fingers trembling, crackling with nervous energy she felt as if she were under hypnosis, acting on someone else's command. She knew it was crazy but she did it all the same; she picked up her phone and called her friend Simon, at BBC Surrey.

"I was wondering if you could do me a favour?" she said, "I'm working on a story and I need to get in touch with a broadcast journalist at BBC Wales... could you check your internal directory for her contact details? I'd be really grateful. Thanks. The name is Ceri Rampart."

In the space of a few minutes she was dialling the number, a wild thump inside her chest, her voice strained with hope as she heard a female voice.

"Hi, is that Ceri?"

"Yes?"

"My name's Kate McKinley. I'm a journalist at the Surrey Advertiser and I'm writing a story on poets with a connection to Surrey."

The voice on the other end sounded cagey.

"Right...?"

"I saw an interview you conducted with Alys Protheroe and I wondered if you had the contact details of her agent?"

"Why do you want to speak to Alys Protheroe?"

"I believe she spent her formative years in Surrey?"

"Where did you get that information?"

"Well, I know the family."

"In England?"

“Yes.”

“I think you’re mistaken.”

There was a note of impatience in Ceri’s voice.

“Perhaps I am but I’d still like to speak with Alys, if possible. Do you know who her agent is?”

“She doesn’t have an agent.”

“Have you got any idea how I might get in touch with her? I couldn’t find her on social media.”

“She doesn’t do social media.”

“Well perhaps you’d be kind enough to – ”

“Sorry – what did you say your name was?”

Ceri’s voice carried an edge of irritation now.

“Kate McKinley from the Surrey Ad –” but when she looked up, the girls were walking towards her, giggling as they strode across the car park, clutching their purchases. In five seconds they would open the car door and hear her every word.

“I’m sorry, I’ve got to go,” said Kate. “Thanks for your time.”

And she hung up the phone in a red-faced flurry.

The girls didn’t seem to notice as they climbed into the back seat. They were too busy comparing the size of their hands, measuring the length of their fingers.

“I’m gayer than you,” said Lowri. “Look, my index finger is way shorter than the ring finger. Yours are equal length. You’re barely queer at all.”

She wondered if the conversation was being conducted for her benefit, just to make it clear, if she hadn’t been sure. And perhaps Jade wanted her to pass comment on the statement but Kate’s heart was racing and her palms were sweaty and she had just told an outright lie. What the hell had she been thinking? It was madness, picking up the

threads of Sybil's obsession and winding them into her own, weaving a noose for her own neck. She felt a sudden rush of gratitude that Jade had arrived in the nick of time, preventing Kate from committing such a folly. She swivelled round to see what the girls had bought.

"Beautiful," she said, smiling at Jade. "Excellent choices" and as her daughter smiled back at her, she thought: *This is what matters: my lovely girl. Nothing else.*

Standing on a stranger's doorstep, Kate's confidence dipped. Lowri's parents' house was not the quaint little miner's cottage she had envisioned. It was not situated on a sooty terraced row, but at the top of a long narrow drive, running off an affluent residential street.

She wished she had worn something more elegant than the Breton striped top she had slung on that morning. Smoothing out its creases, she found a crust of Weetabix stuck to the front. It wouldn't scratch off with her fingernail. She was rearranging the folds of her scarf to cover the stain when the front door opened and Lowri's mother, Grace, stood before them, tall and toothy, gushing at them to come in, lunch was on the way. Her skin was darker than Lowri's, freckles scattered across her cheeks like chia seeds. Jade thrust her roses at Grace and said something that Kate didn't catch before traipsing inside after Lowri, leaving Kate on the doorstep.

"Hello there," Kate said, offering up a bottle of wine.

"I'm Kate – Jade's mum. This is for you. "

"That's so kind of you, thanks," said Grace, accepting the bottle and guiding her guest inside.

"It's nothing really, just a little – "

Kate's words trailed off as she took in the house – huge, plush, polished. There were deep sofas and heavy bookcases, canvas paintings and enormous floor lamps bent over like heavy-headed sunflowers.

“You have a lovely home,” said Kate.

“Thank you,” came a voice from the kitchen and as Kate stepped up the hallway, Lowri's dad came out to meet them.

“I'm Meirion,” he said. “I hope you're not a vegetarian?”

Kate reassured him, “I eat everything,” and walked through to the kitchen. Grace was bustling around the central island, collecting cutlery and linen napkins.

“Can I do anything to help?” Kate asked.

“No thank you,” said Grace. “Please, take a seat. Lowri, why don't you get everyone a drink?”

Kate perched on a stool beside the island, fussing over her scarf and the hidden Weetabix.

“You found us okay then?” said Meirion.

“Yes,” said Kate, “Thanks to Lowri. The place names here are a bit of a mystery. How do you survive without vowels?”

Jade glared at her.

“That's such an ignorant cliché, Mum.”

Lowri's dad was kinder.

“It's a common misconception,” he said gently, “But Y and W are vowels in Welsh so we actually have more vowels than English.”

They all endured an awkward silence until Grace broke in with a smile,

“We're almost ready. Shall we sit up at the table?”

Kate spent the meal watching her words, and trying to ignore the flitting of languages around the table. There was Welsh and English and something that sounded a little like French. She couldn't make sense of half of what was going on, until Grace stepped in to translate.

"I was just saying that there is an Osi Rhys Osmond exhibition at the Oriel this weekend. Perhaps you'll have time to pop down there?"

"Erm, maybe –"

"That's one of his paintings over there. The one with the swallow. We're big fans in this house."

Kate nodded and smiled and tried to think of something interesting to say. Meirion said something unintelligible to Jade and remarkably, she responded in a faltering jumble of sound.

"I didn't know you were learning Welsh," said Kate.

"There's lots you don't know about me Mum," Jade replied and as if to prove it, she said something else that Kate couldn't understand. All she could make out was the name Alys Protheroe.

"Lowri tells me you've an interest in Welsh poetry?" said Meirion.

Not wishing to embarrass Jade any further, Kate shook off her first instinct – *God no!* – and made a sound of polite interest.

"Alys is a friend of mine actually," said Meirion, "We're both members of Côrwynt..."

He smiled at her bemused face.

"A choir. We did pretty well in the last Eisteddfod."

"Oh right."

She wanted to ask, what exactly *is* an Eisteddfod when Meirion cut across the thought.

“How do you know her, Kate?”

“I don’t really...”

And then she found herself repeating her outrageous lie.

“It’s possible,” said Meirion. “I know she lived with her father in England for a while. I’m not sure where though... she doesn’t really talk about that period in her life.”

“Well I wanted to interview her about it but I couldn’t find her contact details.”

“She only lives about twenty minutes away. I could give her a call if you like?”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t want to impose... I’d just like to send her an e-mail or something.”

Meirion lifted his phone out of his shirt pocket and scrolled through his contact list.

“I’m sure she’d be delighted to talk to you about her work. It’s not often that someone outside of Wales shows an interest to be honest.”

He placed his phone on the rosewood table between them, span it round on the glossy surface. Kate stared down in disbelief. A name, an address, a telephone number. As she typed the details into her own phone, muttering,

“Thank you, you’re very kind,” she wondered if she had at last truly taken leave of her senses.

Meirion got up from his seat and ran a hand along the wall of books behind him.

“I’m sure I’ve got her collection here somewhere...” he said.

When Kate looked up, he was sliding a volume from the clutches of books that lined the wall like strata.

“Here we are.”

He placed the slim volume in her hands. She looked down at the dust jacket: a stage, a spotlight, an owl in a glass dome. She felt suddenly queasy. Terry's voice came back to her: *What's wrong with dear old Olga?*

"Are you okay?" said Meirion. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

She looked up at him and forced a smile.

"Not a ghost, no. Definitely not a ghost."

Llansteffan, 11th October 2015.

Eleven o'clock in the morning and Alys was on her third coffee. She sat in the middle of the living room floor, where the rug used to be, hemmed in by the faint stain of water. In her hands, she held forty letters or more; a mother's torment, woven into words. They spilled over her lap, fanning out around her like a ball gown.

She picked up a letter and read:

And he spake this parable unto them, saying,

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?

Luke 15:3

I shall come for you my lamb and repent. I shall let go of everything if only you will come home.

Alys tossed it aside and picked up another, reading quickly, greedily, skimming over stretches of automatic writing, spitting out the sermons, relishing the rare, lucid interludes.

How could you ever doubt that I love you? I'd have given you the top brick off the chimney! Do you remember Tiny Tears - the little pink suit I made for her? You used to take her everywhere. Forever scolding the poor thing. Smacking her on the bottom with a ruler one moment and nursing her at your breast the next! Such a peculiar child.

Whatever I did for you, it was never enough. In the end, you turned out just like your father.

She felt sick, bloated, and still, she picked up another letter.

Was it because of Daniel? Of course I knew all about his proclivities but I tried my best to protect you. He confessed his perversion to me when he was a boy of twelve. I took him to see the vicar. Do you remember that lovely chap, Reverend Masters? Well anyway, he wasn't much cop when it came to Daniel. "Love the sinner, hate the sin." All very well for him to say.

Your father took matters into his own hands. And when that didn't work, he took him to see a professional - someone who knew what she was doing. Daniel ran out of the place screaming! It was terribly embarrassing for your father. Needless to say, he didn't get his money back either. But you see, we did try to do the right thing. We always tried.

Alys got up and walked over to the kitchen, started the kettle then quickly shut it off, thinking she'd heard a noise outside. She peered out between the herbs on the window shelf. One of Sally's chickens had wandered into the back garden and was strutting through the flowerbeds, picking at specks. There were foxes in these parts – bold and diurnal.

She turned away from the window and set the kettle going again, plopped a Camomile tea bag into a mug. Her gaze drifted towards the telephone and the noticeboard above it, where she'd pinned Officer Willis's card. What might she say?

"I don't know how I could have missed it... I suppose it was the shock. It appears that I have become the object of this woman's obsession. No idea why she thinks that I

am this person... this 'Emma.' It's totally..." – the Welsh word eluded her –
"preposterous!"

How quickly, English staked its claim on her.

She kept a copy of Bruce's English-Welsh Dictionary on the bookcase between the kitchen and the living room, a hangover from the days when she and Hawys would sit and play Scrabble together. It struck her then, that even after all these years, the only dictionaries in the house were bilingual. It reminded her of something Hawys used to say: the survival of the conquered depends upon their willingness to exist in translation.

Like it or not, there were two languages in this land.

She reached for 'The Bruce', like an old friend. He offered her: *hurt, afresymol, gwrthun, chwerthinllyd*. Familiar words that she knew as well as she knew the shape of the hill outside her window, the scent of its mist, the texture of its soil. How could she forget? She closed the dictionary with a clap, annoyed and chastened. She still needed him, but he did not need her. Words remained, with or without her remembrance of them.

Sybil was in no state to deliver the letters herself but perhaps she'd hired a private investigator to follow Alys, to photograph her on the beach, to watch where she hid the spare key.

Alys finished making her tea and sat down at the kitchen table, flipping open her laptop. There was an e-mail from Heulwen, the Producer of *Celf Cymru*. She'd sent through a proposal for a new TV show.

"You'd be perfect on the Beeb," she said, "They're all about nations and regions, these days. You could become a full time TV presenter and give up teaching altogether."

Alys wasn't sure she wanted to give up teaching. There was something noble in the task that made her feel worthy of being here in Wales. She had made her home in the Welsh language; to step out now, without it, would be ungrateful – worse – it would risk exposure.

Alys scanned through the e-mail, then picked up the phone.

“*Duwcs*, you're efficient,” said Heulwen, “I only sent the e-mail through ten minutes ago...”

Alys made all the right noises as Heulwen chattered on about commissioning rounds and set a date to meet up for lunch. Then, just as the conversation was drawing to a close, Alys said:

“Bit of a random question but, what did you do with all that ‘fan mail’ that came last year?”

“I shredded it. Sorry, isn't that what we agreed?”

“Yes, no it's fine. It doesn't matter.”

“She's not got hold of your home address has she? I told the manager at the Home – if the fruit loop sent any more letters, we'd have to get the police involved. It's harassment...”

“No no no, it's nothing like that. I'm just working on an idea for my next collection. I thought it would be interesting research, that's all.”

“Oh, I see. Well. Sorry. All gone.”

“Not to worry...”

“To be honest I don't think they'd have been a lot of use to you... just a bunch of bible quotes. By the way, I had a message from Ceri Rampart. She's been trying to get hold of you.”

The name rang in Alys's head like an alarm.

“Ceri Rampart.”

“Yeah, you know – the journalist. She said she’s left a message for you at home...”

Alys felt her breath tighten in her chest, a slow horror tingling her skin. She jabbered goodbye and hung up the phone.

A message. From Ceri Rampart.

There was a sudden noise at the front door, Siôn’s whistle. Dragging Sybil’s letters into a pile, Alys stuffed them under the rug.

“We finished up early,” said Siôn, strolling into the lounge. “Thought I’d come back and see how you’re doing. Eifion’s on his way over – he wants to say hello.”

Alys pulled a face; she was not in the mood for Eifion.

“What is it?”

“I just – I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?”

But then Eifion arrived at the cottage, bearing paperwork and lilies.

“How’s my favourite bard? Not too shaken up I hope?”

Alys took the flowers from him and set about finding a vase.

“Thank you Eifion, that’s very sweet of you...”

“Well I am very sweet you know,” he said, making himself at home at the kitchen table, hanging his coat on the back of a chair.

“Coffee?” said Siôn.

“Does the pope shit in the woods?” Eifion replied in English.

Alys snipped the ends off the lily stems and set about arranging them in an enamel jug.

“Any news from the police?” said Eifion, helping himself to a biscuit from the packet on the table.

“No,” Alys replied.

“You’d think they’d show a bit of interest.”

“Well nothing was actually stolen,” said Siôn, “so technically, it’s not a crime scene. Plus they’ve only got the neighbours’ description to go on.”

“I just met your neighbour,” said Eifion, putting on a plummy accent, “Sally.”

“She’s back from hospital then?” said Siôn.

Eifion nodded through a mouthful of crumbs.

“She and her sprog. Tell me, why do parents always think everyone wants to look at their spawn?” he said. “Took me about ten minutes to get free of her. Most of that was spent trying to work out the name she’s given the kid.”

Alys frowned at Eifion over the top of the lilies.

“She kept saying ‘Ira’ and I said, ‘Oh, as in Gershwin?’ and she says, ‘No, no, it’s a girl. Eira.’

He imitated her learner’s Welsh, its reek of the homecounties.

“Eye-ra, Aye-ra, she says and finally the penny drops. They’re calling it ‘Eira’ ...”

He gestured to the grey slab of sky outside, the welling rain.

“...presumably on account of all that snow we’ve been having,” he said with a sarcastic snort.

Siôn was not amused. He pressed down hard on the coffee plunger.

“You’re such a *coc oen*, Eifion.”

“Oh come on, you’ve got to admit it’s pretty stupid to give your kid a name you can’t pronounce.”

“Don’t do that,” said Alys.

“What?”

“Don’t belittle learners.”

Siôn placed a cup of coffee on the table before Eifion and sat down next to him, a grim expression on his face.

“They’re the future of our language,” he said.

Eifion laughed loudly.

“Well if that’s true then God help us all,” he said, slurping his coffee.

“Don’t forget... I’m a learner,” said Alys.

Eifion scoffed, “*Myn yffach i*, that’s different.”

“Why is it different?” said Alys.

“You’re not some snobby little *Saesnes* from the homecounties – you’re Welsh!”

For a moment, Alys felt words forming like stones in her mouth. She caught Siôn’s eye, the nervous expression on his face.

“That reminds me actually,” said Eifion, “I bumped into Ceri Rampart earlier on.”

That name again. Alys froze.

“She’s doing a series about the Welsh diaspora for S4C,” said Eifion. “A kind of ‘Long Lost Family’ meets ‘Who Do You Think You Are’. They get celebrities to revisit old haunts, meet up with distant relatives, cry on camera – you know the drill. I said I’d mention it, seeing as I was coming here anyway.”

Alys stared into her cup.

“Don’t you fancy it?” said Eifion.

“I’m a very private person,” said Alys, looking him suddenly in the eye.

“Could be good publicity.”

This, of course, was the real reason for Eifion’s visit; his concern about the break-in was secondary. What he really cared about was Siôn’s brand. Here was an opportunity for Alys to build their profile as a power couple. She felt sick at the thought of it.

“Are you feeling okay?” said Eifion, “You look pale.”

“I think I’m coming down with something,” said Alys.

Eifion recoiled at these words, raising his fingertips as if the kitchen table were a site of contagion.

“Well anyway, I won’t keep you,” he said. “Just wanted to check you’re alright.”

Siôn saw Eifion out but Alys didn’t bother to get up from the table. A cold shiver of nausea ran over her skin. It was over. She would be exposed, shamed, Siôn’s career would be wrecked and it was all her fault.

When Siôn came back into the room, he found her cradling her face in her hands.

“What’s wrong?” he said.

She looked up, her face sallow.

“I’ve been keeping something from you. I don’t know why I didn’t just show you last night.”

She took him through to the lounge and pulled back the rug, unveiling Sybil’s letters like a stain, or a body.

“Whoever broke into our house, left these. They know who I am, Siôn. They know.”

The Severn Bridge, 10th October 2015.

It was nine o'clock at night as Kate drove under the strobing cables of the Severn Bridge, chanting "oh-god-oh-god-oh-god" and thumping her palm on the edge of the steering wheel. *What the hell have I done?*

She switched off her phone, craving time to think, time to conjure a lie. For how could she explain to Lawrence why she was late and what she had done? Where would she even begin? She tried out phrases in her mind: *I missed the exit east on the M4...*

A lie. She didn't miss it. She chose – at the last minute – a different route.

Another lie. It wasn't a last minute decision. When did she decide? Perhaps it was at brunch with Jade, or during their expensive visit to Top Shop, or in the coffee shop when Kate said, casually, that she ought to hit the road, try and beat the traffic.

No. It was before then. It was at lunch, yesterday, at Lowri's parents' house. It was the moment Kate saw the owl on the cover of Alys Protheroe's book. The sight of those dead eyes in their glass dome jail... it was a punch to the throat. Kate excused herself from the table, attempted to gather her wits in the bathroom upstairs. Splashing water over her face, she got mascara on Grace's ivory hand towel and spent ages trying to rub it out. In the end, Jade came to find her.

"Mum?"

"Just coming..."

And though Kate tried to make her voice bright, and her manner breezy, Jade wasn't buying it.

"You've been crying," she said when Kate emerged from the bathroom.

"I think I'm allergic to the flowers."

Jade eyed her suspiciously.

“You were fine in the car...”

“And I’m fine now. Come on, let’s get back to the table.”

But before they returned downstairs, Jade reached out to Kate, her fingertips brushing the soft inside of her mother’s arm.

“Are you a bit... freaked out?”

Kate froze, horrified at the thought of what Jade might have gleaned.

“Why should I be?”

“Because of me, because I’m...”

Kate’s breath released in a burst of relief.

“Oh darling. It’s hardly news, is it?”

They moved downstairs together arm in arm, admiring the elegant grey walls, the Kyffin prints, a rosy watercolour patched with maps and sepia faces.

“You came marching into the kitchen when you were seven years old, declaring “Me and Holly are lesbiands.”

Jade laughed, picking up the story.

“And you said, ‘Not *me* and Holly; Holly and *I*.’”

“Quite right too.”

“I didn’t think you remembered that,” said Jade as they returned to the table.

“Of course I do. I remember everything.”

Kate performed beautifully through the rest of lunch. She ate the strawberry cheesecake that was brought out for dessert, she asked Grace thoughtful questions about her work at the Arts Council, she listened as Meirion explained the painting on the staircase, the artist they called ‘Osi’, a neighbour of Alys Protheroe. Her name again. The name of her village. So close.

Kate smiled politely and chatted with ease and no one could have guessed that beneath her sanguine expression, a storm was raging; she was about to take leave of her senses.

Kate got back into the car and sat with her hands gripping the wheel, unable to control the shivers in her arms. She told herself: *breathe*, but when she took a long, deep breath, it was filled with the scent of Sybil.

Ever since Jade had opened that damned shoebox, the car had been infused with an aroma of Chanel and boiled sweets. The scent clung to Kate's clothes like an aura of sadness. And though it was madness to blame a dead woman – Dr Chundra would call it magical thinking – Kate felt certain that somehow Sybil was responsible for all of this.

Driving along the motorway that morning, she had sensed Sybil's presence at her side, urging her off course, chasing her down narrow country roads, hunting signs for a place Kate couldn't even pronounce: Llansteffan. She had felt the land beneath her wheels undulating like the unfurling of a magic carpet.

It hadn't been hard to find the address Meirion gave her; the village was tiny. A hairpin bend took Kate down towards the beach, past kayaks banked up high on sand dunes to her left and a row of colourful cottages to the right. The road opened out into a deserted carpark, a cafe, closed out of season. Above all this was a wooded hill, through which she could just make out the turret of a castle, bared like a boar's tooth.

Lowri's father had described it perfectly. High up on the cliff, behind the castle, was Alys's house. The steps from her back garden cascaded down onto the beach, only accessible at low tide. It sounded like a fairytale house; exactly the kind of place where Emma would choose to live.

It was a reconnaissance mission only; Kate had no intention of breaking in. She took her camera out of the boot with an idea of photographing the house from the beach. A long lens might give her a peek of the interior.

But then, as she made her way across the hard-rippled sand, Alys appeared before her, like a summoned spirit. Kate recognised her instantly from the press photograph, plump and stately, her hair the colour of the aniseed gobstoppers they used to buy from Terry's sweet shop. She was several metres away but walking straight towards Kate.

Kate panicked, ran back to the car, panting, almost crying, landing in her seat with a *whump* as she slammed the car door. What if Alys recognised her? What if she didn't?

Recovering her breath, she glanced over at the front passenger seat where she had left Sybil's letters. Loosening the pink ribbon with her forefinger, she eased out one of the envelopes, pulled a letter free. It was nothing but paper and ink and yet, it seemed to Kate, that she held in her hand the very essence of Sybil. She could hear the clipped creak of her voice.

"I was weak. I failed you. You were a child, afraid of the dark. I was afraid of the light."

"All right Sybil," said Kate. "We've come this far."

Stuffing the letters into her jacket pocket, she got out of the car, and made her way back to the beach. Stepping out from the shelter of the grimacing cliff, she prepared to face the light. But it was too late; she had missed her moment. Alys was gone.

Kate kept walking, her fingers worrying Sybil's letters. The tide was out, the sea a thread of silver on the horizon. Cockles speckled the sandflats, their shells cracked open

like hearts. She walked the arcuate sweep of the beach, kicking at sand crusts and cursing herself. She might have turned back then, but her eyes fell upon a trail of footprints, cut deep into the sand. Following them, she knew that they would lead her all the way up the cliff, to the house where Alys lived.

It was a narrow, rectangular house, brilliant white against the slate clouds. A double glazed porch poked out from the front and beside it, a stony drive upon which a dark green mini was parked, new and expensive-looking.

Kate rang the bell outside the porch and cleared her throat. She had prepared a little speech on the walk up the cliff. Somewhere inside the house, a dog barked but no one came to the door. Stepping back from the porch, she looked up at the blank windows; a lambent glow behind drawn blinds. She pressed the bell again and waited. Nothing.

Inside the porch, she saw two pairs of boots, a red umbrella, and a bay tree in an ornamental pot. Clementine had had something similar when they were teenagers – it was where they stashed the spare key so Kate could let herself in after school. She watched her own hand reach for the handle of the porch door; it opened. She bent down to the miniature bay tree and tipped back the ornamental pot – a long shot but you never knew – and there it was: a silver house key.

It was lunacy, it was illegal, it was everything Dr Chundra had warned her against and yet, what if Sybil was right about Alys Protheroe? What if Alys was really Emma? Kate unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The dog was a sappy thing; shaggy haired, easily won over with a belly rub. He followed her about as she nosed inside the house.

“Hello?” she called out. No reply came.

The floor of the hallway was a puzzle of tessellating tiles in faded shades of blue to the bottom of the stairs. Elsewhere, the floors were reclaimed wood, knots and whorls sanded smooth, softened with vibrant rugs. The walls were canvas white and crammed with art.

It was not what Kate had pictured. Somehow, she could only conjure Emma in her childhood home: a house of polished surfaces and frilled pelmets, porcelain ladies dancing on doilies.

Alys’s house was a mess, the living room jumbled with books and papers, a ring stained coffee table, a sofa matted with dog hair. No sign, she noticed, of children. The lounge backed into a cluttered kitchen, strung with copper pots and morroccan crockery and when Kate turned, she found herself facing a hideous abstract painting; scabs of paint in black and red.

Beyond it, the stairs curved up towards a bright window. A gallery of photographs staggered up the wall. Amongst them was the wan face of a girl. She was squinting up at the camera, one hand raised to shield her eyes from the light. Kate’s stomach clenched. It was just one in a series of pictures, flagrantly displayed for all to see. In one picture, the girl was standing in a field with a man and a boy, in another, a woman with wayward hair held the girl’s hand in a dance along the seashore.

As Kate peered at the photographs, her heart tripped into a giddy rhythm, for she knew that pale face, the set of her jaw, eyes the colour of brushed steel. It was unlikely, and yet, irrefutable: it was Emma.

The photographs were almost chronological. Kate followed them upstairs, watching her childhood friend transform, sinking under new flesh, gathering weight and volume, growing into someone new, becoming Alys. Kate took out her smartphone and photographed the evidence.

At the top of the stairs, she found a large wooden chair, and beside it, a photograph of Alys wearing a crown. So it was a chair after all. The BBC article was correct.

She found her way into a small cluttered room with a desk: Alys's study. The desk was modern, glass topped, shaggy with papers. Kate picked up a thumb-curved notebook and scanned the insides. Emma's handwriting flickered past, sloping and spiked one day, fat and coiling the next, every word hidden in plain sight, written in Welsh.

On the shelf, was a photograph of Alys with an old lady and beside it, a wooden jewellery box. Kate opened the box and peered inside. There were some photographs, some newspaper cuttings and a broken necklace. The pendant had been knotted onto the chain: a golden letter K.

A noise downstairs. Kate panicked, snapped the lid shut, clipping the tip of her little finger. She yelped, stuffed her finger in her mouth and stepped into the corner behind the door. Frozen, straining for sounds from downstairs, she could hear nothing but the whoosh of her own pulse. A few seconds passed. It was probably just the dog, padding about downstairs. Still, it was time to leave. Tugging Sybil's letters out of her jacket pocket, Kate placed them on the desk and scanned around for something to write on but then a woman's voice called up the stairs,

"Yoo hoo! Anybody home? Alys? Siôn?"

As if she had been shaken from a dream, Kate became acutely aware of the lunacy of what she was doing. She crouched down behind the door then quickly stood up again. Hiding was not the answer; she might end up getting locked inside the house. There came the clatter of cutlery from downstairs, kitchen drawers opening and closing.

Moving quietly over the landing, she trod softly down the first few steps. The front door was wide open; if she was careful, she might creep out, undetected. She'd have to pass the kitchen but she was in luck – she could see from this angle that the woman's back was turned. She had crouched down to make a fuss of the dog.

"Silly Mummy forgot to lock the door," she was saying.

Kate moved swiftly down the stairs.

The dog barked, the woman looked up, screamed in fright and fell back onto her bottom, baring her enormous belly like an upended bowl.

"I'm so sorry!" said Kate, rushing into the kitchen to help the woman up. She began garbling, "You must be Caroline... Alys has told me so much about you."

An uncertain smile hovered over the woman's features as Kate eased her to her feet.

"Actually it's Sally."

"Of course it is. Sorry, I'm terrible with names..."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Alys's sister. I've been away in Surrey for a while – I was hoping to surprise her."

A pained expression crossed the woman's face. She pressed a hand to her stomach.

"Let me help you to the sofa," said Kate, guiding Sally across the living room. "Is this your first baby?"

They got as far as the lounge rug when Sally stopped and gasped. Liquid gushed from the flutes of her skirt.

“Oh my goodness, it’s happening,” she said.

“It’s okay, you’re okay,” said Kate. “Everything will be fine.”

“I need to call my husband. I need James.”

“Okay, we’ll give him a call now,” said Kate but when Sally tried his mobile, the line was engaged and Sally was starting to panic. Her belly clenched with a mild contraction.

“I can’t walk back up the hill,” she wailed. “I want James. You’ll have to go and get him.”

And so Kate found herself trudging down the narrow track of Alys’s drive and round the corner to the neighbouring house where a sign on the gate read ‘cwttch’. She could see a man through the downstairs window, talking on the phone. Kate waved an arm at him, in an attempt to get his attention. He looked at her, quizzically, before stepping back into the darkness of the house. Moments later, he appeared at the front door, a stern expression on his face.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“It’s your wife...”

“Sally?”

“Yes. She’s at Alys’s house. She’s gone into labour.”

He drove round to pick Sally up, guiding her into the car and reassuring her that her weekend bag was packed and in the boot, and that Alys’s sister would deal with the mess of the rug. It was a stroke of luck really, that she happened to be there. They were so grateful for the quick thinking of Alys’s sister that they forgot to ask her name.

#

Halfway across the Severn Bridge, Kate slowed the car to a stop. It was dangerous, probably illegal. She staggered out onto the tarmac, the pulse in her head roaring oceans. This was worse than the incident in the hospital. That could be explained as a moment of madness – this was breaking and entering. Sally and James could easily identify her. She could get a criminal record, lose her job, her marriage, and for what?

She clambered over the low white bollards and onto the footpath at the outer edge of the bridge. Hips pressed against the spindle railings, she leaned out over the river, as if she might vomit. Beneath her, the Severn stretched out in silky silver sheets, all the way to the horizon. Her gaze followed its flow to a hazed line where the low moon met its own fragmented reflection.

The key. Kate dug her hand into her jeans pocket and pulled it out. Why she took it, she could not say. She held it up between finger and thumb, an ordinary silver house key. But what it had opened! With that key, Kate had stepped into Alys's life and into Emma's lie. For there was no longer any doubt in Kate's mind: Alys was Emma.

Kate hurled the key out over the edge of the bridge, watching it spin down like a sycamore seed before it hit the surface of the water and was gulped silently down.

Climbing back into her car, Kate started the engine. Several minutes passed before it was safe to pull out and rejoin the stream of traffic. She half expected to hear sirens. It would be a relief perhaps, to be caught, to end the anticipation. And it occurred to her then, that Emma had lived this way for twenty years, waiting for the sound of sirens.

Llansteffan, 12th October 2015.

“Where did you get the letters?”

Alys heard the tremor in her own voice and swallowed hard. She was sitting at the kitchen table, the cordless telephone pressed to her cheek, waiting for Ceri Rampart to confess.

“Sorry – who is this?”

“It’s Alys. Protheroe.”

Ceri Rampart changed the tone of her voice, cooed Alys’s name in a sickly sigh.

“Alys... I’m so glad you called back. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you. I left a message on your –”

“Where did you get the letters?”

“What letters?”

“Ceri. Please. You broke into my house.”

“What?”

“Or did you hire someone else to do it?”

“I’m sorry Alys, truly – I don’t know what you’re talking about. What’s going on?”

“You tell *me*.”

“All I did was leave a message on your answerphone saying that I’d love to talk to you about a new project –”

“What?”

Alys was struck dumb with confusion: had she got this all terribly wrong? As she tried to gauge what was real and what she had imagined, Ceri blathered on.

“It’s a wonderful new programme... heart-warming, reuniting people with their loved ones. Now I understand that your family life has been complicated... but now that

Hawys has passed away, I wondered if perhaps you'd like to reconnect with your father. It could be a very healing experience for you both. We have a dedicated team... a few details and we could easily track him down for you. I know he took you to England but you never mentioned where exactly... it wasn't Surrey was it?"

Alys bristled at the word. What kind of game was Ceri playing?

"Why Surrey?"

"Oh nothing really..."

"Go on."

"Well I had a strange phone call the other day: a reporter from the Surrey Advertiser, asking for your contact details. She said she'd seen my interview with you online."

"What was her name?"

"Something McKinley, I've got it written down here..."

"Did you give her my address?"

"Of course I didn't! I wouldn't break the trust between us, Alys. Here it is... Kate McKinley."

"Kate."

Her name lingered on the line even as Ceri prattled on.

"But you don't need to talk to anyone else, Alys. If anyone should be telling this story, it's me."

"My life is not your story," said Alys and she hung up the phone.

She sat for a moment in the quiet of the kitchen, listening to the wind whistling down the chimneybreast, the sea roiling in the distance.

Kate. Of course it was Kate. The fact of it hit her like a wave. Who else would care enough to connect the distant dots of Alys's existence? To draw them together like constellating stars?

She thought of the appeals Kate had made over the years, the online chatroom. An image of Kate flashed into her mind: lying on the floor of the church hall, buckled under Terry. It was not the same image Emma had seen all those years ago for Alys understood now, what Emma had not.

Shame surged inside her, a liquid pressure, crushing breath from her chest. She was trapped. Clenching her fingernails into her palms, she squeezed her eyes tight and reached through her mind for a poem. This was a trick Hawys had taught her. When Alys was feeling overwhelmed or frightened, when her brain was ringing like a plucked string, Hawys would take her hands, and hold her gaze, and feed her a poem.

"I started doing it in prison," she'd said, "and then, in the psychiatric hospital... when I felt myself slipping under the wave."

Alys pictured Hawys in a locked room, meting out the dark hours in poetic measures, knowing that she would never see her best friend again, that she had lost her daughter forever. If Hawys could get through that, then Alys could get through this.

"Daw'r wennol yn ôl i'w nyth, o'i haelwyd â'r wehelyth..." she said out loud.

The Swallow will find her nest, But kinship leaves the fireside.

Waldo. An old favourite. Closing her eyes, she let the pattern of the cynghanedd wrap around her, let its rhythm shape her breath into words, until she felt herself once more.

That night, when Siôn got home from his plenary meeting at the Assembly, he found Alys sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, wearing her coat and boots and staring intently at a piece of paper.

“What is it?” he said, “What’s happened?”

He shut the door and dumped his briefcase on the hall table, along with a white paper bag from the pharmacy.

“I’ve just got back from the neighbours’...” said Alys.

Siôn clipped down the blue tiled hallway in his smart shoes, pausing to pinch the fabric above his knees as he sat down beside her on the step. Alys angled the paper in her hand away from him.

“Is everything okay?” he said.

“Fine. The baby’s tiny. The thing I bought her probably won’t fit.”

“Well. Babies grow.”

He tapped the back of the paper in her hand.

“What’s this?”

Alys turned it over to reveal a grainy picture, printed off from the internet.

“This is who broke into our house,” she said.

Siôn recognised the wide-set eyes, the waspish smile.

“Kate?”

He had watched her video appeals over the years, had even played out the possibilities of getting in touch, but always, Alys had refused. There was too much at stake for Idris and Hawys. And now they were both dead, there was too much at stake for Siôn.

“I spoke to Ceri Rampart,” said Alys. “Apparently Kate called her, asking for my contact details. I suppose she must have got the idea from Sybil. Anyway. I printed off Kate’s picture and took it round to show Sally and James.”

“What did they say?”

Alys gave him a harrowed smile.

“It was her; they’re one hundred percent certain.”

Her eyes began to pool.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “It’s a mess.”

Siôn hooked his arm around her, caught her up against his chest.

“It’ll be okay,” he said, kissing the crown of her head.

“But the elections are only seven months away...”

“We can’t think about that now. Let’s just deal with what’s in front of us.” They sat in thoughtful silence for a moment, until Siôn wondered out loud, “Why now?”

Alys said nothing. But the body in Roedale park surfaced in her mind, the face of a girl that could have been – perhaps should have been – Emma. Karen Banks’s parents were back in the newspapers, ashen, broken. Alys had read the details with morbid greed: their marriage had fallen apart, all their savings spent on private investigators. It had taken twenty years but at last they were bringing their daughter home, even if it was only to bury her.

“Alys?”

Siôn pulled away from her, dipped his head to look at her face.

“Have you contacted the police?” he said.

“No. I’ve just been... sitting here.”

“Good. I think we should leave the police out of it if we can.”

“Do you think they’d arrest me?”

“No, of course not. It’s just – it’d be better if we can manage things ourselves. Don’t you think?”

“Yffarn. *Hell*. I don’t know.”

“Kate can’t prove anything. We’ve got a birth certificate, national insurance number, marriage certificate...”

“What if she finds something else – ”

“That’s not going to happen.”

A wave of nausea sent goosebumps scattering over Alys’s skin. She clambered to her feet and took herself off to the downstairs bathroom to be sick.

After a few minutes, Siôn knocked on the door.

“Are you okay? Can I come in?”

She opened the door and Siôn handed her the white paper bag he had brought home with him. Alys unrolled the top and peered inside.

“Oh Siôn, that was a waste of money,” she said, pulling out a pregnancy testing kit.

“Why not just rule it out?” said Siôn, “You’ve been feeling sick for days now. You ought to go to the doctor.”

He was flushed, his cheeks ruddy with unspoken emotion. It was unnerving. He had always said that he didn’t mind, that being a father wasn’t important to him, but Alys could see it in his face now; a forlorn hope.

“It’s impossible,” she said gently.

“Unlikely,” said Siôn, “not impossible.”

Alys closed the door and opened the packet. There were three plastic sticks inside. Why on earth did they sell them in threes – wasn’t one enough? She wondered which of her friends she could give the rest to; it would be a shame to waste them all.

Alys had accepted long ago that she would never be a mother. The doctor said she was scarred on the inside from an infection that had gone untreated for years. Sybil had been too ashamed to take her to the doctor. Instead, she'd fed her Cranberry Juice and told her to buck up. It wasn't until her thirteen-year-old daughter was admitted to hospital that Sybil understood the damage that could be done, by doing nothing.

Alys emerged from the downstairs toilet feeling cross and sweaty.

"Well?" said Siôn.

"It takes five minutes for the line to appear," said Alys.

"Where's the stick?"

"On the sink."

"Well don't leave it there!" he said, bounding off to fetch it.

She felt her heart, stone heavy in her chest. He would be disappointed. He would blame her.

The telephone rang. Alys slouched into the living room and sat on the sofa, leaning across the armrest to pick up the phone from the side table.

"Hello?"

"Haia Blodyn," came the voice on the end of the line. "Fi sy' 'ma." *Hello flower. It's only me.* It was Heulwen, the producer of 'Celf Cymru'. Alys smiled, glad for the reprieve from her private drama. They exchanged chitchat for a minute or two before Heulwen came to the point.

"I thought you'd be interested to know, the nursing home finally got back to me. Your superfan – Sybil Granger – won't be bothering you any more. Apparently she died a few months ago."

Alys gazed out of the window at the sea, flexing its grey muscle against the horizon.

“Alys?” said Heulwen, “Are you there?”

“Yes. Sorry. Thanks for letting me know. Actually I’ve got to go – I’m running late for choir practice...”

After she had hung up the phone, the dog came padding over to her. Alys sat in silence, smoothing back Nan’s ears, wondering what to do with this new information. Sybil was dead. Alys took a deep breath and thought of the ribboned bundle, stuffed in her desk. All those words: the wretched outpouring, the bitter regret. She ought to feel something and yet, she could not bring herself to feel anything at all.

She looked up at the sound of shoes – scuffing or tripping or dancing – on the wooden floor. Siôn stood in the centre of the room, his face illuminated, eyes wide as oceans, holding the plastic stick up like a trophy.

“Two lines!” he said. “There are two lines!”

#

That night, Alys dreamt of Yr Hafan. Siôn had sold the farm years ago but in the dream, everything was just as it had always been: the paisley cushions on the sofa, china spaniels on the mantelpiece, an aerial photograph of the farm in the hallway. She could hear Hawys’s voice calling her name. Walking into the kitchen, Alys passed the dresser, crammed with blue and white crockery, the wall where Gwen’s copper jelly moulds were mounted like leaping fish. No sign of Hawys. Up the stairs now, feet moving quickly, a sense of rising panic, she searched each room. Hawys was gone.

Alys woke, sobbing, aching to have her back; the mother she had always wanted, the woman who given her back her childhood, raised her with words. Taking care not to

wake Siôn, she slid out of bed into the grey dark, feeling her way along the fuzzy edges of the woodwork and out into the hallway. Open a sliver, the door to her study cast a dagger of light across the landing. She shouldered the door open and stepped inside.

Through the open blind, the moon hung on a black canvas night, its light filtering down like dust, silvering the desk, the shelves, the wooden jewellery box that had once belonged to Hawys. Alys's gaze came to rest on a photograph of herself and Hawys, smiling under paper hats, their last Christmas together before Hawys went into the hospice. Alys picked up the frame and pressed it to her chest.

She had cared for Hawys at home for as long as she possibly could, grateful in part for the opportunity to show her gratitude to the woman who had saved her life. All those years, Hawys never let on. Only towards the end, when the drugs had hazed her brain, did the story begin to unravel.

She became secretive and quarrelsome. She would stare at Alys's face with an inscrutable expression and demand to know who she was. Alys wrestled with her conscience over this, discussed it at length with Siôn but always they came to the conclusion that the truth was too cruel, at this late stage in the game. It had never occurred to Alys, that Hawys invented the game. Not until one afternoon, she found her sitting on the landing upstairs, the contents of the airing cupboard strewn all about her, bannisters festooned with bedsheets, the newel post strung with a banner from Hawys's protest days.

"Mam?" said Alys but Hawys didn't seem to hear her. She was hunkered over a wooden box that Alys hadn't seen before, her lips murmuring with the fervour of a prayer.

"Collais Elin, liw hinon, fy ngeneth oleubleth lon..."

I lost Elin, the colour of sunshine, My fair-haired, joyful daughter.

It was a poem Alys knew well. On another day, she might have joined in the recitation but today, she sensed something awry; she was intruding. She took a creaking step back down the stairs but the sound broke Hawys's reverie. Her woolly back straightened. She called out, "Is that you?"

Alys came to sit beside her on the landing.

"I was going to make tea," she said.

Hawys ignored this remark. Her passerine hand landed on Alys's forearm and she pulled her in close.

"You came to me on a stormy night," she said.

Alys knew this script. It was a story Hawys liked to repeat from time to time, as if its potency grew with repetition.

"Crash landed on the farm like a fallen satellite. And do you know how I knew it was you?"

She stared at Alys, her eyes bright and searching, waiting for the next line.

"You searched my skin – "

"O dy dalcen i dy draed," *From head to toe.*

"Until you found my birthmark..."

Hawys let out a growl of a laugh.

"What is it?" said Alys.

"She never had a birthmark."

This was not part of the script. Alys froze.

"I had to tell Idris something," said Hawys, "Give him some sort of proof. And I noticed that little strawberry mark when Siôn was lifting you onto the sofa. So I said to Idris that if he were to look under your left rib, he would find proof that you were mine – the mark of the stork that brought you to me."

Silence, the length of a single heartbeat.

“I never needed proof,” said Hawys. “I. Had. Faith.”

She had been nursing the wooden box in her lap but now, she placed it down on the floor and opened it up, took out a folded newspaper cutting.

“Roger always hankered after cowboy country,” she said.

Alys took the slip of paper from Hawys’s outstretched fingers.

Texas Tribune. 14th August 1992: Tributes to British family killed in Dallas air crash. Roger Frater, a British entrepreneur, his partner, Shirley and their children, Alice (13) and Richard (4) were onboard light aircraft SR20 when it crashed in inclement weather over Lake Lavon.

“I never asked how you came back to me,” said Hawys. “I was only grateful that you did. But tell me now. Tell me how you rose up out of that lake, dripping mud and lake water and walked across continents to be back here with your mother. That’s what happened. Isn’t it?”

Alys stared mutely, her throat raw with tears but Hawys held her gaze, waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” Alys whispered.

Hawys took her hands and smiled, narrowing her eyes as she leaned in and said,

“That’s what I thought.”

She placed the newspaper cutting back in the wooden box, tucked it up in a blanket and put it to bed on a shelf in the airing cupboard. Then she turned back to Alys and said, “Now then. How about that tea?”

The first chance she got, Alys slunk back to the cupboard on the landing, to dig out the box. Unwrapping it from the blanket, the sheets, she felt as if she were raiding a reliquary. And perhaps that wasn't far from the mark; she had taken more than jewels from this poor dead girl. She owed her a life. Inside the box, along with the newspaper cutting, she found her birth certificate, a baby tooth and a lock of honey-coloured hair. But beside these treasures, something else shone through the dim light; a necklace with a broken chain. Alys knew it at once, for the pendant that lay beside it was a golden letter K. Adrenaline snapped through her body. She closed up the box, stuffed it back where she found it, closed the cupboard and sat with her spine pressed against the wooden door. Hawys knew; she had always known.

Three o'clock in the morning. Alys stared out across the estuary at the glistening lights of Glan-y-Fferi. No hope of going back to sleep now. It wasn't just that Alys was awake; she felt something inside her awakening. She placed the photograph of Hawys on her desk, next to Sybil's letters.

"You're going to be a grandmother," she said into the silence.

It was hard to believe, but she had done all three tests in the packet; they couldn't all be wrong. And though Siôn was more excited than she had ever known him, her own feelings were muddier, tinged with fear. The awful responsibility of it felt like vertigo.

What kind of a mother would she make? Would she have Hawys's resilience? Or Sybil's brittle fear? They had both shaped her, in their different ways. She looked up at Hawys's wooden box and pictured her own child unearthing its contents, the shock of discovering that Mam was not the person she said she was.

Sitting in the final silence of her two dead mothers, Alys was seized by an urge to break it.

She opened the lid of her laptop and began to write. Her fingers moved slowly at first, like swimmers easing themselves into ice water, but then she found her stroke, gave herself up to the current. Words began to flow through her, pouring themselves across the page, a language of clean consonants and hollow vowels, at once separate from herself and undeniably her own. She had carried it within her all this time, concealed in silence. And she is uncertain now, why. What was she so afraid of? Her mother tongue.

Roedale, Friday 20th September 1995.

The season is changing, summer curling in on itself like the beech leaves Emma pushes her feet through on her way to town. She buries her toes under their nut-coloured crusts and kicks up a storm of rusty autumn air.

She has spent the day killing time. Have any of her classmates even noticed her absence? Probably not. She is the invisible girl. The only place she had ever felt seen, is on stage, and that part of her life is over now. She heads for the library; her safe place. Four hours left to decide: is she really going to do this?

She ducks into the newsagent's on the high street and buys herself a ham sandwich from the upright fridge. There are stacks of newspapers in the rack beside her, each one shouting about a girl called Karen. They say she went to London to meet a man. Emma hears her mother's voice in her head: *That's what you get, young lady, that's what you get...*

Emma has been to London loads of times. The first time, was her thirteenth birthday. Terry took her to see Phantom of the Opera. He promised her they'd meet the cast, back stage, but there was a mix up of some kind and they had to leave. Not before Emma caught a glimpse of Christine's dressing room though – the lights around her mirror, make up brushes laid out on the dressing table in rows like tiny fans.

Afterwards, Terry said he was her angel of music. He took her to his office in Soho; a strange little place, almost hidden down a cobblestone alley, like somewhere Oliver Twist might lurk – or Fagin. Terry said it was called a mews, because this is where he brought his muses and Emma laughed, though she didn't understand. They went inside a dingy, red brick building and up a flight of broken wooden stairs until they came to a black door with a plastic stuck-on plaque, announcing 'Big T Productions'. The

office was tiny: a fraying grey carpet, a filing cabinet and a desk with a spinning chair.

Terry twirled Emma around on it until she felt sick.

She walked out of there an hour later, an ache, deep in her thighs, a hollow pain between her legs. All perfectly normal, Terry said. It only meant she was a woman now.

As Emma reaches the library, she catches a glimpse of Clementine's broad, colourful profile swaying towards the council offices on Rope Street. She'll want to know why Emma isn't in school. Dodging into the warmth of the library, she wonders if Clementine has read her memoir yet. Perhaps she is already making arrangements for its publication. What will it feel like, Emma wonders, to read her own name on a spine in the library? And where will they put her? In 'Autobiography' with all those film stars? Or in 'Youth' with Anne Frank? She'd like to be next to Jeanette Winterson, on the edge of 'Memoir' and 'Fiction'.

Terry would not approve. He says it's weird – this need in her to write things down. But it is a compulsion, like that girl in Year 11 who cuts her arms with a compass. It hurts at first, making the marks – but the release!

All these years, she has kept her words secret, stuffed under her bed, buried like a body. Now at last, someone will read them and Emma will no longer be invisible.

She drags the mustard corduroy beanbag out of 'Kiddy Corner' and stuffs it in her favourite nook under the window by the radiator in 'Classic Fiction'. She takes 'Wuthering Heights' down from the shelf for the last time, and passes her final hours reading, devouring chapters between bites of her sandwich.

When she looks up, it is half past five. The library is about to close and Emma is late. She abandons Cathy and Heathcliff, picks up her rucksack, and leaves the library in long strides. Stepping outside, her lungs fill with the scent of bonfires. She crosses the

road towards the manor house, past the flower shop on the corner of Rope Street. A little thrill runs through her when she thinks of the bouquet she sent her mother. She pictures Sybil's face, puzzling over the card: an empty space where words ought to be.

Yes. She is definitely going to do this.

Head down, she enters the park and walks quickly past a cordoned off work site. There is a spattered orange concrete mixer and a pit where they are laying foundations for a public toilet. She thinks for a moment of changing the plan; leaving her clothes here – Terry joked that it was the perfect place to hide a body. But no, she must stick to the plan, do what Terry says. Besides, returning to the pond is like returning to the beginning, to the day Terry dragged her out of the ice water and brought her back to life.

The pond greets her with a reek of stagnant water. Bullrushes brush her thighs as she climbs out of her jeans and drops them at the sludge edge of the pond. A startled moorhen paddles into the reeds, and the last of the day's sunlight skitters on the surface of the water. She drops her trainers, her top, her underwear, even her coat onto the mud. Inside her army surplus bag, Emma has packed her DM boots and a black, baggy dress that Terry gave her to wear. It smells of laundry detergent as she tugs it over her head and she wonders faintly where he got it. Shoving her feet into her boots, she places her bag on top of the clothes and prepares the final touch: an empty bottle of Sybil's sleeping pills.

There. She takes a deep breath and stares at the sorry little pile then turns her back on it. She leaps over the mud and onto the grassy bank – no footprints. The necklace Terry gave her thumps lightly against her throat. It is the most beautiful gift she has ever received; a golden 'K' suspended on a chain.

She wonders in what romantic way he would have presented it to her, if she hadn't found it first – buried at the back of his office drawer and wrapped in a sock, of all things. She'd been silly – jealously demanded to know who it belonged to.

"It's yours, you daft cow," he'd said. "I was going to surprise you but you've ruined that now. It was supposed to be a present, for when we got to Ireland and started our new life together. K for Kelly. I thought it could be your new name."

"... like Kelly Watson in *Home and Away*?" said Emma.

He shrugged. "Of course."

His disappointment in her was painful.

"I'm so sorry. I've been an idiot," she said. "I love it, really, I do. From now on you've got to call me Kelly all the time. I can't believe it – we're really going to do it! We're really going to run away!"

By the time Emma reaches the church hall, it is gone seven. A gold bar of light edges the door, music drifts on the breeze, notes from a familiar jingle. She is late. Terry will be cross. She is about to call his name when she hears a woman's voice inside the hall. Her pulse quickens. Perhaps it is Sybil, perhaps it is Clementine – come to rescue Emma from herself. Feet shuffle. She hears a stifled cry – a laugh perhaps – she cannot tell. She steps inside.

The stage lights are on. Half the set of *My Fair Lady* is strewn across the stage like an insult, the tawdry remains of Emma's finest hour. How jealous Kate must have been. How she must have hated Emma. And how she is taking her revenge. For there is no mistaking, it is Kate, sprawled on the floor of the church hall. Terry's body arches over her, his white, hairy bum, obscene in the stark stage light, pumping and pumping.

Sickened, bloated with jealousy, Emma runs as fast as she can, up the concrete slope, out into the road, not knowing where she is going, certain only that she must get away. She feels the chain around her neck, the pendant 'K' lodged in the hollow of her throat. 'K' for Kate. What an idiot she has been! She runs in the direction of the park, a vague notion of fetching her coat and her bag. She'll go home. She'll just go home, that's all.

She stops to catch her breath on the corner of Rope Street, planting her hands on her thighs, panting down at her knees and when she rises, her chest releases a desperate howl. She watches her breath dissolving into the darkness and wonders if she might pour herself into that breath and rise up on an eddy of night air, transported somewhere. Anywhere.

She hears the engine before she sees Terry's car: a white Ford Escort with a fin, swimming up Rope Street like a shark. She turns her back on it, trudges on up the hill. Everything has changed.

The car stops ahead of Emma. Terry leans across the passenger seat and opens the door so that it swings out across the pavement, like a flag.

"Where have you been?" he says when she is close enough to hear.

She stands back from the car, and Terry has to lean out to speak to her. He is wired, the blue discs of his irises floating on the whites of his eyes.

"I've changed my mind," says Emma. "I'm not coming."

"Don't be silly," says Terry, "Get in."

"No," she says but she doesn't walk away. She is close enough for Terry to reach out, touch her hand, stroke her arm.

"What about our adventure?" he says, his voice wheedling.

"Why don't you take Kate instead?"

He stares at her a moment, then looks away, a vulpine smile on his face.

“I saw you together,” Emma says, “So there’s no point denying it.”

“Get in the car. Let’s talk about this.”

“I’m going home.”

“Get in the car,” he says and his fingers encircle her wrist. He yanks on it hard and she does as she is told. She sits on the fake leather seat, cradling her arm, rubbing the ache in her elbow.

“Good girl,” says Terry, pulling the door closed. He is gentle with her now, conciliatory.

“I know it looks bad but you’ve got to understand... I thought you weren’t coming.”

He strokes the side of her face.

“Kate turned up and just threw herself at me...”

Emma fixes her gaze on the traffic light air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror. It stinks of chemical fruit.

“It was wrong. I shouldn’t have let her...” says Terry, “...but you’ve got to understand, it’s tough for men. We can’t always control these things.”

Emma fingers the necklace she is wearing.

“This was for Kate wasn’t it?”

Terry’s eyelids flutter like a lady in a cartoon.

“No,” he says, “You’re putting two and two together and making five,” and when she doesn’t reply, he keeps talking, working himself up. “You always do this... you get these stupid ideas in your head and your imagination just runs away with you. Seriously. I worry about you. It’s hereditary you know – mental illness. You’ll probably go the same way as your mother.”

Emma's fingertips creep towards the door handle but Terry is quick. He presses a button on the driver's side and the internal lock clicks. When he turns back to her, there is something cold in his expression, a detachment she does not recognise.

"Just when I think you're pretty bright," he says, "you reveal yourself to be exceptionally stupid."

He pulls the car out onto the main road, his foot squeezing down the accelerator, his fist shifting gears, and Emma sees then that her course is set. She cannot change her mind. They pass the park and the manor house and head out of Roedale. As the lights of the town vanish over the hill, the life she has known is behind her.

They drive in silence until the rain comes, striking a crazy jazz rhythm on the roof. The lights above the motorway are hazed with rain, shimmering like halos. Huddled into herself, Emma rests her head against the window, fogging the glass with her breath. She loops her initials with a fingertip and her teeth begin to chatter.

"I'm cold," she says.

"You're fine."

She unbuckles her seatbelt and clambers over onto the back seat. They are driving fast in the middle lane, traffic streaming on either side.

"What are you doing?" Terry yells.

He grabs at her calf muscle but he cannot get purchase.

"I'm getting a blanket - "

"It's dangerous!" Terry yells but she does not listen. She knows he has a blanket in the boot; they've used it for picnics. She lifts the strings on the parcel shelf and gropes around until she feels the matted woollen nap, drags it up into the back seat. It's rough and scratchy but it'll do. She scrambles back up front and wraps the blanket around herself. Terry's jaw sets into a hard square.

"You shouldn't have done that," he says.

They pass a moment or two in silence.

"I'm sorry," Emma says, "but I was freezing. My fingernails have gone purple."

Terry does not reply. A strange smell has entered the car, thick and sickly. It's worse than the air freshener. Emma pinches the tartan fabric to her nose and something sticky comes off on on her fingertips.

"What *is* that?" she says.

"I ran over a deer."

"What?"

"I tried to help it, picked it up with the blanket, but it was too late."

"You mean I've got deer blood on me? Ugh!"

She kicks the blanket off into the footwell; it streaks her shins rust-brown.

"It's all over my legs! You've got to stop at a service station. I've got to get it off me."

Terry is unmoved.

"We're not stopping," he says.

Pulling her hand into the sleeve of her dress, Emma spits on the fabric and rubs at the marks on her legs. The smell is sickening. She wants to cry.

Terry glances over at her, his hand fumbling at the ashtray under the tape deck. The drawer opens and he pulls out a tiny foil parcel.

"Take this," he says.

Emma wipes her tears in the crook of her arm.

"What is it?"

"It'll make you feel better."

She takes the foil parcel and opens it up. Inside is a shiny pill, like a flattened pearl.

“No thanks,” she says.

“Come on,” says Terry, and he reaches out a hand to tap her playfully on the cheek. “You need to chill out.”

“I’m fine,” she says, crushing the foil back together. His hand swims out to her cheek again. A slap this time.

“Take it,” he says. “You’ll feel better.”

Emma does as she is told and Terry is right; she does feel better. All her senses seem to gather inside her, billowing out in a rush of love unleashed. Peace ripples across the surface of her mind, sinking down like silt, settling in her fingers, heavy in her toes, a gentle tugging weight. Outside her window, light rushes past, but she is beyond its reach, bobbing on a distant tide, somewhere between dreams and wakefulness. Time goes.

Emma wakes, cold and alone in Terry’s car. A yellow electric light stutters before her eyes. There is a clunking sound behind her head and the car rocks a little. Shapes come into focus: a petrol station. She must not move. Her eyes are open only a splinter, enough to see the streak of Terry’s body against the glass. He is headed towards the kiosk to pay. Crossing the forecourt, he glances back at the car. She does not move, waits until his back is turned, until he has opened the door of the kiosk, stepped inside. This is her chance.

She opens the car door and steps down onto the concrete. Her knees are weak as a foal’s and she struggles to find her balance. Hunched down, she scrambles across the forecourt, around the side of the kiosk. Here, there is a tyre pressure gauge, a cashpoint

and a public telephone booth. Her BT phone card is still in the pocket of her coat, by the pond, but she can reverse the charges; she knows how to reverse the charges.

Minutes of silence as she waits for the operator to connect her call. Valuable time in which to plan what she will say to Sybil – but it is not her mother who picks up the phone.

“Hello?” says Clive.

She swallows, takes a breath. He is still her father. It must count for something.

She tells him what has happened. She tells him she is sorry. She begs him to come and get her. There must be something wrong with the connection for Clive is not speaking. Panic rises like bile in Emma’s throat. Terry will find her, he’ll be angry and –

“Clementine Barton has been here,” says Clive. He enunciates the words with disgust, “waving around your filth... your work of utter fiction.”

“I’m sorry – ” Emma says, “I didn’t – ” but her words are a whimper and Clive cannot hear them over the sound of the fire. The line goes dead and Emma understands then, that no one will ever read her words; she might never have written them at all.

Terry comes around the corner of the building and finds Emma dazed, clutching the receiver in her hand. He runs his palm over his forehead and takes a step back.

“What have you done?” he says, “What have you done?”

They get back in the car, sit in silence in the forecourt of the petrol station. Terry stares through the windscreen, glassy-eyed, his hand balanced on the rim of the steering wheel, flexing his fingers, reaching for his next move.

“You’re lying,” he says. “You called someone. And now you’ve put me in a really difficult position because I am out on a limb here. I’ve risked everything for you. And it won’t be you who gets into trouble. It’ll be me. All because I tried to help you. I saved

you. And this is how you repay me. You ungrateful little bitch. Both of you – ungrateful little sluts.”

He grips the steering wheel decisively, starts up the car and drives back out into the night.

He does not rejoin the motorway but takes a turning off the main road. It leads out onto a narrow country backroad. Roadsigns flash past quicker than Emma can read them. There are no street lamps out here. The car gathers pace, headlamps blaring down dark twisting roads as Terry’s fingers grip tighter on the wheel. There is a sudden grinding of gears, breaks squealing as the car swerves into a lay by and jerks to a stop, tossing Emma forward in her seat.

Terry leans into Emma’s footwell and grabs the bloody blanket. Stretching over her, he opens her door and bundles the blanket out into the hedgerow. A crust of dried blood clings to the hairs on his forearm. He looks at it and then at Emma. The door is still open. If she could just slip out of her seatbelt –

The door slams and the moment is gone. Terry stares at her, his face grey in the halfnight, his eyes cragged with shadows. And as she tries to read his expression, an idea is forming in her mind, disparate streams of thought, flowing at last in the same direction: there was no deer.

Terry takes a deep breath and speaks slowly.

“The trouble with girls like you,” he says, “is that you think the world owes you something, you think you’re special. Well you know what? You’re not special Emma. There are thousands of girls like you. You are replaceable. I’ve done it before and I can do it again.”

She wants to ask, *done what?* but she knows better than to interrupt a man when he’s speaking. And there was no deer. She is certain now, there was no deer. Her fingers

claw at the chain around her neck. It breaks against her knuckles and the letter K spins through the air.

He has done this before and he will do it again.

She watches the pendant tumble down into the footwell and an idea takes hold of her. The girl in the newspaper. What was her name?

Terry sees something in her face, some dawning of understanding. His nostrils flare, his lips spasm, he draws back his arm and punches her face. She is not expecting it, cannot quite believe it and as her hands spring up to her bleeding nose, the mist of her delusion lifts. Terry's plans for their great escape, their new beginning; none of it has anything to do with Emma. It is all about Terry. He is the one running away – from what he has done – and from what he is about to do.

He hits Emma again and she falls back against the car door, her head denting the glass. She loses consciousness.

When she wakes, the car is moving again, travelling through a dark tunnel of trees. Where is he taking her? The world outside her window is unfamiliar, murky as lake water. She cannot make sense of its shapes and shadows. She must do something, anything. She tugs at the glinting door handle but it will not move and now Terry knows she is awake. He does not take his eyes off the road but he reaches out a hand. The car speeds forward, faster and faster into the dark and his palm is on the back of her skull, his fingers meet in the roots of her hair, he brings her forehead down on the dashboard.

She is not getting out of this alive. But she can take him with her. She lunges for the steering wheel, heaves it towards her with all the weight of her body, feels her own power as the car responds, its great mechanical heft veering off the road. Terry pulls back on the wheel but he cannot fight gravity and the car is dragging them over the edge of some unseen precipice. Branches batter the windscreen, screech down the sides of

the car as they plunge into the dark. For a suspended moment, Emma wonders if they are falling or flying, for there is a lightness inside her; she feels her spirit rising up out of her body, soaring.

#

When Siôn entered the study, it was lit up with the glow of early morning. The sun spilled over the sea like broken yolk, puddling light on the surface of the water.

“Wyt ti ‘di bod yn sgwennu trwy’r nos?” he asked. *Have you been writing all night?*

Alys stiffened at the interruption; the person from Porlock. But when she looked up, she found she was glad to see Siôn’s face, as if she were surfacing from a deep dive, as if she had been away for days.

“Wyt ti’n iawn?” he asked, yawning, his face creased with sleep. *Are you okay?*

She smiled, standing up and stretching out her spine, her arms, her neck, glad to be in her own body.

“Popeth yn iawn,” she said. *Everything’s fine.*

She came towards him and pressed her lips to the waffled dents of the bedspread on his cheek. Siôn looped his arms around her. She felt the closeness of their bodies and thought of the tiny being, floating between them.

“What have you been writing?” said Siôn, “A poem?”

“A story,” said Alys and then, as if to correct a lie of omission, “Emma’s story.”

She studied his expression for signs of disapproval but he remained impassive, undecided perhaps.

“A memoir?”

Alys balked at the word.

“No,” she said. “It’s as if I’m writing someone else’s life.”

Siôn stroked back a strand of her hair, his gaze drifting off, over her shoulder, at the brightening sky. She felt his embrace loosening, feared him slipping away from her.

“I don’t have to publish it or anything,” she said quickly. “It’s just something I want to write for the baby, for when he or she is old enough to understand.”

Siôn walked over to the window and unfastened the catch. Heaving up the lower sash, a gush of salty autumn air flooded in. He stood in its sweep, looking out over the estuary.

“I think it’s a good idea,” he said, “It feels like the right time.”

“What about the election?”

“It’s a risk; I know, but it’ll come out at some point anyway. Better that it comes from you, rather than Ceri Rampart or Kate or someone else.”

Alys joined him at the window, slipped her arms around his waist, and breathed in the sea. The tide was on its way in, sleek and golden, smoothing over the night’s secret swellings.

“Everything looks different now,” she said.

Siôn wrapped his arm over her shoulder and pulled her close.

“Everything *is* different now.”

Roedale, 10th October 2015.

When Kate arrived home to Roedale, it was after eleven o'clock at night. She got out of her car and stepped onto the pavement. The moon shone in an oily puddle of light, casting crisp shadows up the garden path. She walked its length, breathing ghostly plumes into the cold night air and wondering what to tell Lawrence. As she reached into her bag for her key, the door opened and suddenly he was standing before her, forlorn, unshaven, demanding to know what happened.

"Jade said you left hours ago. I've been calling and calling..."

"I'm sorry," said Kate, stepping inside. Lawrence took her bag and shut the door, following her down the tiled hallway into the kitchen. She sat down in the rocking chair by the wood stove, glad of the heat radiating from its embers. With her face in her hands, she took a deep, tired breath. The scrape of a chair on the slate floor. When she looked up, Lawrence was sitting before her. He took her hands in his own.

"What's happened?"

Kate swallowed hard, uncertain of the words that were about to come out of her mouth, unsure if she had the gall to lie to his face, or the courage not to. She stalled.

"Where's Bobby?"

"Asleep upstairs. He's fine. He's missed you, but he's fine."

A tremor in her lip. Tears began to spill down her face.

"Whatever it is," said Lawrence, "Just tell me."

His face was drawn; she noticed flecks of grey at his temples.

"I didn't plan it," Kate said. "It just happened."

The idea of Sybil rose in her mind, a lingering scent in the folds of her scarf. She uncoiled it from her neck, chucked the floral bundle onto the kitchen table. Lawrence watched with measured intensity.

“What have you done?” he said.

When it came to it, Kate was too bone tired to lie. She looked him in the eyes and told him the truth.

“I’ve found Emma.”

Confession was a sweet release. Only when she reached *the night of*, did Kate falter, fearing Lawrence would judge her – worse, pity her. Instead, he surprised her. When she got to the end of her story, his face was wet with tears.

“It’s like there was a part of you I could never reach,” he said. “Now I know why. I wish I could do something. Make the fucker pay.”

“Well he is dead.”

“Still. People ought to know the truth.”

Kate was ferocious.

“No. Never. I’d never do that to Jade. It’s got to be Emma. She’s wrapped up in this somehow. I need to know how.”

Lawrence released a held breath; his shoulders slackened.

“I’m so sorry you felt you couldn’t trust me with this before. But you’ve got to know Kate... I’m on your side. I’m always on your side. I love you more than you know.”

And perhaps too, he understood Kate better than she knew, for he said then:

“All this time, I thought you were obsessed with Emma because you loved her... but I get it now. You must really, fucking hate her.”

The conversation lasted days. Even as life returned to its habitual patterns, the threads and themes of the discussion were never fully put down. Emma became a presence in the house, a thought that could not be shaken. Clementine noticed that Kate seemed brighter, happier but when she asked her about it, Kate found that she was not yet ready to share the secret, to break the spell of this new closeness between she and Lawrence.

Kate's new, reduced working hours meant that she didn't get in to the office until Wednesday morning. Tim Scranton was out chasing a story on the closure of a drug and alcohol clinic. Salim was writing up a piece on dog fouling fines. Kate logged into her computer and prepared to face a grey heap of council press releases. Instead, she found an e-mail waiting at the top of her inbox. It had been sent that very morning at 8:45. The name set her fingers tingling: *Alys_Yr_Hafan*. Sweat prickling between her shoulder blades, Kate clicked on the message and read three brief sentences. Then she picked up her mobile phone and dialled Lawrence's number.

"You're never gonna believe this," she said when he picked up. "Alys Protheroe is coming to Roedale. She wants to meet me."

M4, 16th October 2015.

Alys had spent two decades learning the lie of her new land. She had peered at Dublin from the hat brim of Ynys Môn, eaten monks' chocolate on Llŷn's fingertip, she had sailed round the toe tip of Ynys Dewi, hiked up Yr Wyddfa, been lowered into Big Pit, she had ventured all the way to the Wye but she had never been back beyond it, until now.

She watched from the fogged window, as rain lashed the motorway and the terrain began to change. Rucked earth and jagged mountains smoothed into folds of English fields. The border was imperceptible and yet she felt the shift inside her.

Somewhere along the journey, she had picked up a poem. For miles now she had been absent-mindedly twirling it over in her mind like a plucked flower.

"What did you say?" said Siôn, shifting lanes.

"Travelling towards the light, we were waylaid by darkness."

"You're writing in English now?"

"It's R.S. Thomas."

"Oh. I suppose I ought to know that."

They listened to the steady beat of the windscreen wipers, the rain on the roof like scattering stones.

"I think he was right," said Siôn, eyeing the bulbous rainclouds. Shall we pull over for a break?"

But Alys would not be waylaid any longer. They pressed on without stopping, all the way to the M25, several junctions along its length, then onto the slip road that looped off the motorway and wound down the drenched hill into Roedale.

Everything, at first, was alien. There were new blocks of sand-coloured flats, slanting glass office buildings with topiary sentinels. But as they joined the one-way system and circled into town, familiar landmarks rose up like ship masts.

“The clock tower...” said Alys, “And there’s the library.”

The sedate shoulders of the manor house nudged above the park. Alys had arranged to meet Kate in its shiny new coffee shop, the only part of the new development that had been completed since the discovery of Karen Banks’s body. Siôn drew into the public car park on the edge of the grounds and switched off the engine.

“What time is it?” he said.

“Two.”

“What time did you tell Kate?”

“Half two.”

“Do you want to go and check in at the hotel and come back?”

“No.”

“Do you want to go and have a look around?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll go and get a ticket from the machine.”

Alys waited, listening to the settling engine snap and click. A fine voile of rain trembled in the air outside. She felt it pressing up against the glass, closing in on her. The muscles in her shoulders tensed, her thighs stiffened, fighting the impulse to flee. Siôn strode back towards the car, a square white ticket between his fingers.

“Come on,” he said, opening the door and placing the ticket on the dashboard, “The rain’s almost stopped.”

They made their way over hump-backed playing fields, lush with fresh rain. The council offices hulked on one side, the lake shone on the distant left, and between them, lay the halted remains of the playground renovations. Where Karen's body had been found, the ground gaped open. The wound had been fenced in with wire mesh and strips of police tape. At one end of the fence was a modest heap of flowers. Somebody had tied a teddy bear to the corner post.

Alys headed towards this improvised shrine, one hand in her pocket, the touch of metal on her fingertips. K for Karen. A girl she had never known and yet, with whom she felt a peculiar kinship. They had worn the same necklace; the same chain.

Siôn placed a hand on Alys's shoulder.

"It's almost time," he said.

They walked towards the cafe at the edge of the park and a figure came into focus. She was small and sturdy, with the compact bulk of a pony. Her hair was blonder than in the photograph on the internet, frizzing in the damp air.

"Yffach, dyna hi. *That's her,*" said Alys, tightening her grip on Siôn's fingers. Kate had seen her too. She made a small wave like a Brownie salute. It took excruciating minutes for Alys to close the space between them, knowing that her every step was being scrutinised, that she was stepping into alien territory.

#

Alys reached the tarmac path, smiling, her arms open at an angle that might invite a hug. Kate planted her hands in the pockets of her raincoat.

"You came," she said.

"Yes. I'm Alys and this is my – this is Siôn."

Kate nodded at him. Something in the gesture, the curve of Kate's lip, brought Clementine to Alys's mind. A tall, smooth-looking man stepped forward. Alys hadn't registered his presence until now.

"I'm Lawrence, Kate's husband," he said, offering his hand to shake, "And this is Bobby."

He wheeled round the buggy that he had been pushing back and forth, and a little boy stared up at Alys, his eyes round and brown as coppers.

"Hello Bobby," she said.

The polite greetings stalled to strained silence.

"Do you want a coffee?" said Lawrence. "We've got a table."

"I think I'd prefer to walk," said Alys, deferring to Kate, "If that's okay with you?"

Kate nodded and it was agreed that the men would stay in the cafe, while Kate and Alys took a stroll around the lake.

"Meet you back here in an hour?" Alys said to Siôn. Her Welsh felt conspicuous here, out of place. Siôn squeezed her hand and flared his eyes in their old signal: everything will be okay.

"Bydd popeth yn iawn," he said.

The women walked along the path that ran the length of the playing fields, down towards the lake. The air, clean and cold on her cheeks, made Alys think of home.

"How's Sally?" said Kate.

Alys frowned.

"Your neighbour?"

"Oh," said Alys, flushing. "Fine. Mother and baby doing well."

"What did she have?"

“A girl. Eira.” Then, when there came no response, she added, “It means ‘Snow’ in Welsh.”

“I suppose I should say sorry,” said Kate, “For breaking into your house.” She gave Alys a sidelong glance. “I’m not though. I’m relieved I’m not mad, that I’ve not had the police on my doorstep, but I’m not sorry.”

Alys felt she ought to speak, but she could think of nothing to say.

The path towards the pond was littered with beech leaves, curled into tubes like chrysalises. The rain had taken their crunch.

“I’m sorry I never contacted you,” said Alys.

“Are you?”

Alys half laughed. “No. I was quite happy.”

“Why did you want to meet now?”

“Well. I thought it was better than waiting for you to break into my house again.”

Kate smiled at last.

They passed an ellipse of beech trees and a memory pranced into Alys’s thoughts: she and Kate as girls, conjuring spells.

“Rise up you dead and live again,” she said.

Kate obliged her with the end of the line, “death shall have no dominion.”

A small, tentative laugh, then silence.

“Did you hear about Sybil?” Kate said at last.

Alys nodded.

“You know, it was Sybil who figured out who you were.”

“How?”

“She saw you on TV.”

“Why was she watching S4C?”

Kate blew out her cheeks. "God knows."

A family pedalled past them, tinkling bike bells, rattling stabilisers.

"No one believed her of course."

"Except you."

"Not even me."

They had reached the scruff edge of the pond where the mud was stubbled with sedge. A weeping willow stooped over the bank, dripping yellow leaves onto the path.

"What changed your mind?" said Alys.

"A number of little things..."

Her face clouded with thoughts that Alys could not read.

"I did think about you over the years," said Alys. "I saw your appeals."

"But you never thought to get in touch, just to let us know you're alive."

"Back then, it was better not to."

"Better for whom?" said Kate.

Alys felt a weight in her chest, a longing for Hawys, for dear Idris. There was so much to explain to Kate, too much for a first meeting.

"It's complicated," she said.

Kate snorted. "Is that the best you can do?"

She was trembling, her body braced with anger.

"Do you really want to know what changed my mind?" she said. "How I knew that Sybil was right? It was the owl on the cover of your book. Watching, staring, doing nothing to help me."

Her words travelled with an electric kick, knocking the breath from Alys's chest.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't understand. I should have, but I didn't."

Neither one spoke for several minutes. Silence gave out to the sound of squelching boots, children laughing nearby, ducks skittering over water. Alys picked up a conker from the ground, rolled its smooth ball into the cup of her hand.

“If it’s any consolation, Terry almost killed me,” she said at last. “I think he’d already killed someone else.”

She looked into the distance at the police cordon, glinting rain drops in the autumn sun.

“Perhaps you had a lucky escape. We both did.”

When she looked up, Kate’s mouth was twisted with contempt.

“What?”

“I just mean – ”

“How fucking dare you. I’ve been living with the consequences of that night for twenty years.

“I didn’t mean, I know –”

“No, you don’t know. I had a child.”

Alys felt light-headed, weak at the thought that Terry – some small part of him – was walking around in the world, even now.

“I have a nineteen-year-old daughter: Jade. And while I was bringing her up, a memorial fund was set up in Terry Timson’s name, a plaque was put up outside the church hall. I had to walk past it every day.”

Alys swallowed something hot and acid at the back of her throat.

“We could go to the police now,” she said. “I could tell them what I saw. I could tell them –”

“Don’t you dare. As far as Jade is concerned, her dad is – was – Luke. If you tell her anything different, I’ll kill you myself.”

Alys stood in the shadows of the blackthorn thicket that ringed the lake, her mind measuring the weight of this new information.

“Why didn’t Clementine take you to the police?”

“I didn’t tell her. I was humiliated – and then, that very same night, you disappeared. You managed to make it all about you. Like always.”

Alys stopped still on the woodland path, staggered towards one of the greying benches on the grass bank, plumped down upon scales of lichen. She hid her face in the shell of her hands and began to cry, her back heaving sobs.

“I’m sorry,” she said through her fingers, “I’m so sorry.”

Kate said nothing. A minute or two passed before Alys heard the bench creak, felt its struts rise beneath her, Kate’s hand on the curve of her spine. She felt the warmth of Kate’s arm around her, pulling Alys into an embrace.

“Can you ever forgive me?” Alys said.

Kate did not reply but her hand was firm and smooth on Alys’s back. It felt good to be held.

“We should get back,” Kate said, presently.

“Not yet. Please. Tell me what can I do to make things right.”

Kate looked out over the lake, its surface still and silver as a shield.

“You’ve got to stop hiding,” she said. “You’ve got to tell your story. There may be others... maybe the girl they found in the park.”

“Karen Banks.”

Alys brought the necklace out of her pocket, picked a bobble of wool from the clasp.

“Terry gave this to me as a gift. It could be a coincidence.”

Kate took it from Alys's fingers, held it up to the light, before handing it back to Alys.

"I don't think so."

Alys thought of the piece she had begun to write. How easily the words had run through her. She pictured other people reading those words, Karen Banks's parents.

"Come on," said Kate. "The men will wonder where we've got to."

Alys found a tissue in the pit of her pocket and dabbed at her blotched cheeks.

"Okay."

She was following Kate towards the tarmac path, looking down, blowing her nose when she stumbled into Kate's rigid back.

"Let's go the other way," Kate said, turning swiftly, taking hold of Alys's arm.

"Why? What is it?"

And then she saw him, just a few metres away, bent down at the water's edge, hurling breadcrumbs at the ducks: Clive. He was pot-bellied, double-chinned, wearing his baldness like a kippah.

"Look at the size of that duck," he said to the little girl beside him, "Greedy thing."

The girl shrieked with laughter as a fat mallard snapped at her feet.

"Is that - ?" Alys said, softly.

Kate nodded. "Your half sister. Come on. Unless you want to -?"

Alys shook her head and turned onto the path. She did not want to see him, did not want to engage with him at all. And yet, walking back towards the coffee shop, her arm looped with Kate's, she felt the dead weight of Clive's presence behind her. She looked back over her shoulder, her stomach tight, sweat beading between her breasts. The little girl was jumping up and down, a happy doll, as yet unbroken. She couldn't be

more than eight or nine. How long before she woke in the night to the stink of Clive's breath on her neck? The cold clamp of his hand?

When they reached the coffee shop, Siôn was sitting alone amongst a jumble of baby paraphernalia, looking at his phone. He got to his feet when Alys walked in.

"Ydy popeth yn iawn?" he said. *All okay?*

His expression softened as Alys smiled at him, the slightest nod of her head.

"Is Lawrence in the bathroom?" Kate asked.

"Yes. Nappy change."

"Sorry we were gone so long."

"That's okay. Lawrence has been giving me tips on prams and things. Apparently we need an all terrain three-wheeler."

Kate's head snapped round to face Alys.

"You're pregnant?"

Alys nodded.

"Why didn't you say?"

"I don't know. It didn't come up."

"Well. Congratulations."

She hugged Alys just as Lawrence emerged from the bathroom with Bobby on his hip.

"That went well then," he said to Siôn.

"Apparently so."

Later on, after they had checked in at their hotel, Alys and Siôn went round to The Laurels for supper. Stepping into the house felt to Alys, like slipping into a half-forgotten dream. Kate had redecorated of course, but the house retained a certain indefinable

scent, something in the plaster or the Victorian brickwork that plunged Alys back into the lost pool of her childhood. Rainy days playing rummy or marbles, or dressing up the china doll that Kate received from Father Christmas. These were things Alys thought she had forgotten. And yet they remained. Being in that house, she felt tender, exposed, not only to Kate and Lawrence but to Siôn, for this was a part of her life that he had never seen before.

Much of the evening was spent filling in the intervening years, sketching out the characters in their lives, marking out events. Alys said Yr Hafan was 'home'. The word crinkled Kate's brow, her lips pursed with suspicion as Alys described her family. Idris, with his calloused hands and quiet warmth, the vibrato in his whistle. Dear Hawys, with her wild hair and her quick mind, her deep nurturing words.

"I'm sure you loved them and all," said Kate, "but it's a hell of a lie to go around saying you were related."

"In Welsh, it was never a lie. 'Perthyn' is simply to belong."

Kate's expression was sceptical, her eyelids heavy as she refilled her own wineglass with Malbec.

"But what about your real mother?" she said, "I know she wasn't perfect but she loved you as best she could."

Alys took a sip of fizzy water, made a noncommittal noise.

"Top up?" Kate asked Siôn.

He smiled and shook his head.

"Seriously," said Kate. "Did you read those letters? Heartbreaking."

"She claimed to love me," said Alys, "But she never knew me, Kate. Not really. Perhaps she had her own idea of me, but she wasn't interested in the truth."

Lawrence returned to the room, having settled the baby for the third time that evening.

“Once you’re parents,” he said, regaining his seat, “It’ll be a long time till you eat a plate of hot food.”

No one reacted.

“Oh dear. What have I missed?”

“I was just saying how much Sybil loved Emma.”

No one had used the name Emma until now. Alys felt her heart quicken, her throat parched. She took another sip of water.

Siôn had been quiet for a long time, but he spoke up now that Alys could not.

“Love isn’t just something you say; it’s something you do.”

“And Sybil did nothing,” said Alys, a bitter crack in her voice.

Kate sat up straight in her chair.

“Sybil knew about my father. She saw, but she did nothing.”

Lawrence’s cutlery clattered in the silence. Kate took a sip of wine.

“Well that’s a mistake we must not repeat,” she said softly. “We have a chance now to do something. The question is – what?”

The following morning, Siôn and Alys woke late, drained from a night of talking, thinking and planning. When Siôn drew back the curtain, the autumn sky was bleary as a half-opened eye. Alys had not drunk a drop of alcohol and yet she felt thick-headed, nauseous. It might go on for weeks, Kate said. She should know; she had been pregnant twice. The first time, she had been little more than a child herself. Thinking of this, a glassy sheen of sweat rolled across Alys’s chest; she was going to be sick.

She emerged from the hotel bathroom feeling purged. As she washed and dressed and brushed her teeth, she picked out the words she would use today but the thought of saying them out loud made her sick again.

She was still uncertain of the right words, as Siôn drove her out of the hotel carpark and down the slick drive onto Roedale Road. She stared out of the car window. The glass was beaded with raindrops that streaked into tears as the wind got to them. How to begin? For though she felt her story bubbling inside her, it was a wayward force. To tell it, she would have to tame it, grab a beginning, sort and winnow, pick a place for the final full stop. And with the stream of these thoughts popping in her mind, the car drew to a standstill.

Alys looked up at an old redbrick building with a hefty looking door. The sign above it was stamped with a silver shield and the words *Roedale Police Station*.

Walking onto the clean linoleum, Alys caught a faint whiff of disinfectant. They might have been in A and E but for the emptiness of the waiting room. A row of blue plastic chairs was lined up along the back wall. Up front, a sweeping reception desk in beech veneer.

With the gentle pressure of Siôn's hand on her back, Alys stepped forward. The police officer on duty was sitting behind a thick plastic window.

"Can I help you?" he said.

He was a similar age to Alys, his hair a faded shade of red, and as he smiled at her, she felt a jolt of recognition, though she could not place his face.

"I have some information," she said.

"About a crime?"

She felt the letter K in her pocket, held it, moist in her fist.

“Yes. And also, about a missing person.”

The officer span around on his chair, reached into a stack of plastic trays and pulled out a form.

“Okay, I’m going to need you to fill this out for me first. Do you know the case number?”

“No, I –”

“Okay, well, fill in your details at the top. Then put in the name of the missing person here, followed by the details of where you saw them, what they were wearing...”

He was handsome behind the years, behind the extra pounds. Two words floated into her head: *diet coke*. She flushed at the memory.

“Um, is your name Tom Carson?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

He tilted his head at her, a quizzical expression on his face, as if she had just set him a puzzle.

“I think we were at school together,” said Alys. When he asked her name, she felt the held breath of so many years bundled up behind her solar plexus, rushing out of her in words she hadn’t spoken for two decades:

“Emma Granger.”

Epilogue: Roedale, 2016.

Roedale library is lit up like a pocket of hope. Blinking in the dazzling lights, Alys stares at the audience taking their seats. Faces look harsh under the electric lights, wineglasses like goblets of blood. But there is her friend Heulwen, and there are Meirion and Grace. Her chest swells with gratitude; they've come all the way from Wales to be here. How strange and wonderful that they should be unwitting agents in all this and how fitting, that a book should be the bridge between two worlds.

Sitting beside Alys, in a red scoop chair, is Kate. Her fingertips worry the edge of her notepad as she scans the questions they have prepared for tonight's launch. It is a year since their reunion in Roedale Park, a year of talking, listening and writing. Alys delivered the first draft of her book just before she delivered her baby: Dinogad. She named him after the lullaby, the first Welsh poem she ever heard; the first she learned to recite. While Alys was working on her novel, Kate wrote articles about Karen Banks, about Terry Timson, about the failure of a community to listen. After reading her pieces, two new witnesses came forward, including the 'girlfriend' in Ireland. DCI Blakey offered a full and unqualified apology, along with her assurance that 'lessons have been learned'. She was forced to resign and so too, was Kate. She received too many commissions for articles and opinion pieces to carry on at The Advertiser.

Where is Siôn? Where is Dinogad? As Alys scans the crowd, she catches the eye of the library manager, smiling, tapping her wristwatch. Time to get on with the show. Alys nods and smiles through the steam of fear rising inside her. Where are they? A puling cry from across the room makes her breasts prickle. Her breath steadies when she sees Siôn, standing on the sidelines, bouncing from foot to foot, gently patting the baby's

back. Siôn smiles, flares his eyes at her. She reads the words on his lips from across the room: Pob lwc, ti mynd i fod yn wych. *Good luck, you're going to be great.*

Kate places a hand on her arm.

“Are you ready?”

Alys nods. Kate speaks softly.

“Thank you for doing this,” she says. “You know, when we were kids, I didn’t always like Emma... but I like Alys. I’m glad you’re in my life.”

Before Alys can muster a reply, Kate is on her feet and addressing the audience.

“Good evening and welcome to the launch of Alys Protheroe’s debut novel, ‘Traces / Olion’. Thank you all for coming. My name is Kate McKinley and I have the pleasure of –”

But Alys is no longer listening; her mind is racing ahead to the next part of the evening, to the part where she will have to get up and read, to the part where she relinquishes all her secrets once and for all. It is too late to take the words back; they have been printed on paper in Welsh and English, the two halves of herself made one on the page.

She feels the eyes of the audience upon her, a tightening of focus as Kate says her name. The time has come. Alys gets to her feet, takes a breath. The quiet is gossamer soft. She holds it within her a moment more, a cherished last breath. Then she sets it free, hears her voice lift up like a sky lantern, setting the darkness alight.

THE END