

# A LIFTING UP FOR THOSE WHO MOURN

Rob Mimpriss

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My husband is signalling to his brother to come and take me away.

I cannot see him, of course. From my window I see only the end of the cottage where my husband now sleeps, and thistledown blown by a rising wind across the pasture nearest the cliffs. But I can hear, from the bay, the motor turning to stop the boat coming close to the rocks, and I know the signs my husband is giving Iolo to land. But Iolo fears those rocks – that, and I, are why he no longer lives on the island – and I know I will not be taken to the mainland today.

But I felt no pity for Miss Davies, not when I saw her handed by Dewi from the boat, nor later when she cried in the night because she was homesick. I saw the short-sleeved dress, salmon pink, very pretty, the ankles neither hard work nor childbearing had thickened, and I thought, ‘Is she here to milk cows and cut hay or to open a clothes shop?’ He let her hand drop quick enough, and I saw her coming up the slope quite lightly, taking stock, I dare say, until she saw me. That night, after the dancing, her crying annoyed me. I poked Dewi until I was sure he could hear, and I said, ‘She’s your skivvy, not mine. You’ll have to go and comfort her.’ He groaned. ‘Let her cry. The girl’s just homesick.’ I felt no hatred of her then, only irritation and dislike.

So her face darkened the way faces darken when I look at them, and she said, ‘Oh! Mrs Williams!’ I was standing where the path was smooth, for that day my leg was paining me, with Moi the dog at my side. I know how I must have looked, the Dragon of the Isle. I said nothing, waiting for her to come close. The tone of her skin was quite even and pale. She said, ‘I’m the girl who’s come here to work on the farm.’ I said, ‘That’s between you and Mr Williams.’ She tried to

smile, and her blue eyes flickered down to the brace below my knee. I could see that she was afraid of me.

That evening I could see her trying to keep her guard, to watch me and adapt herself. But Dewi was determined to break her reserve. He questioned her, and she told us about her father's job in the bank and her brother at the front, her lodgings near the clothes shop where she worked, and the dances she went to in the evenings. She only displeased him once. She said, 'That little man in the boat, he's funny. Does he ever say anything at all?' There was a short pause, and I said, 'Mr Williams's brother? He's deaf and dumb.' She stared at her plate and said, 'I'm sorry.' She washed up after supper, perhaps to prove herself to us. The wireless was playing a waltz, and Dewi suggested they dance. I wonder what she thought, as she lay in the darkness crying – I wonder whose pity she wanted. She was just a young girl on an island with the two of us, and only the story-books told her what to expect.

I could have said that no romance ever took place on this island. I have lived here for thirty years since I came as a bride to the young man whose brother I loved. In that time I have seen Dewi grow taciturn and Iolo turn gnarled and stiff in his hands, drifting deeper into a loneliness my signs can barely reach. I have learnt to live as a cripple with bitterness in my womb. When she was dying I wanted to tell her my story, the real story about this island, but she was in great pain and wanted only to be comforted. Dewi held her like a child until the end. I believe he told her the story of Branwen and Brân.

There were girls who crossed to the island to find out who their husbands would be. I never put my handkerchief in a spring to see if an eel would disturb it, but I remember how hard my father beat me when he saw the tokens Iolo had given me. A cripple and a deaf-mute together, he said, and what would the children be like? That night I wept bitterly in my room. The next day I agreed to marry Dewi.

He had left the harvest until Mari arrived. I was coming back from the milking when I saw them cutting the hay. She handled the scythe like a heavy thing, bending the grass when it ought to be cut, and I saw Dewi put his hands round her shoulders to show her the swing of the blade. She smiled, giving up her weight to his arms, and he leaned forward to kiss the crown of her head. I took the milk churns into the dairy. My anger thickened slowly, like butter.

There were never very many secrets on this island. It is a small one, just six hundred acres, and at its busiest time there were only the farmhouse and a few cottages, the cottages which stand empty now. We keep some milch cows and sheep, and we grow vegetables. In the autumn Dewi and Iolo shoot seals since the blubber is used for the cattle and sheep, and also is good as a liniment. My husband and I never speak. He is incurious when I go to chapel on the mainland, and when he stays in town for the market I ask him no questions. Perhaps he has taken other women, but I have never asked. In all the years I have lived with him I have never heard him lie.

So when Dewi told me he had business on the mainland, and that to give her a treat Miss Davies was coming, I made it clear that I would be part of the expedition also. If she wanted a hat, I had clothes rations: I would help her choose; we would go to the Benefit dance together. Mari was out digging potatoes in the yard, and Dewi was sitting in his shirtsleeves at the table, watching me cook. Whatever delights he had planned for the two of them, he would have to tell her they were off, and I told him, with secret glee, that it would not be proper for a middle-aged man and a young girl to be seen together – people would talk. His smile faltered as he tried to decide how much I knew. Just then she returned, and as I set her to scrub and quarter the potatoes I rallied her that she had nearly gone with Dewi to the mainland unchaperoned.

But they must have decided to make the best of it, perhaps by conspiring to pity me, and when Iolo fetched us across the sound we were a hilarious group. I was wearing the dress I had run up myself with the red polka-dots and the bow, and Dewi was wearing his brown woollen suit. It was a long time since I had been in the town, and the bustle of it startled me. A soldier came out of

the church with his bride, a man was led handcuffed from the court while a crowd jeered him, and I had forgotten that there are such things as children.

And although the whole town laughed at my dress and saw that my husband was unfaithful to me, I can take the happiness which that day gave me at its worth. We went to the shop where she had worked, Mari and I, and she encouraged me to try on dresses more and more youthful and absurd, until even I could see my folly, and laughed with her. So I chose the black skirt and blue blouse that now I shall wear at my trial, and Mari also chose a straw hat that matched her well. She liked me that morning. She was in a mood to confide, and I let her chatter about the shop: the difficult customers with long accounts, the manager who was often rude, her plans to save money during the war, and one day have a shop of her own. She saw no conflict between telling me these things and her adultery with my husband. We went to the café for tea arm in arm.

But Dewi had drunk, and perhaps desperation made him shameless, for everyone in the dance could see the eyes he made at her. They danced four times, moving close, while I and other people watched them, for they were an ill-matched, awkward pair. I was pleased that a soldier her age should ask to dance, and pleased that she let him, but always she went back to Dewi. Strange though it seems, perhaps she did love him, and perhaps he deserved to be loved if he made her loneliness on the island feel less. I danced with a man more than eighty years old, taking the foxtrot at the pace of a tango, and I also remember the happiness of this. I knew that my husband had disgraced me, and knowing was easier on my mind.

It was midnight when Iolo shipped us back across the sound. She was merry, humming the tunes we had danced to, and Dewi laughed with her and held an arm round her waist. I sat with Iolo at the tiller and held my peace. His face, as always, had the look of a thing, and no stranger would have seen he had wit and strength of will. But I could feel how much he pitied me.

So that was it. After the day on the mainland I waited until Dewi and Mari grew bold, and then I took the gun that is meant for seal-killing and went to the meadow where they lay. It is a strange

thing to hold a gun in your hand, a strange thing to see people hasty to obey you. I made them dress and stand apart, and then I shot her. The smoke and kick of the gun made me stagger, and when again I could see, the blood had soaked her pink dress and had splattered Dewi, and it was black from her bile. She was still conscious, and I would have finished her. But I felt I had done all I wanted to do, and when Dewi told me to go back to the house I was pleased to find that I was still a good wife and could obey him.

You expect a shot in the liver to kill quickly. But Mari gave up her life slowly and with pain – only in this did she show she was strong. When he came in to me with his fists and made me carry the body and clean it, I saw the ugliness of her death. In this way also I have won a victory over Mari, for I know that mine shall not be a disfigured corpse.

But sooner or later the wind will drop. And Dewi will lead me from my room and take me down to the harbour, where Iolo will be waiting for me. No signs will pass between us, for my hands will be bound. But Iolo is a good man, and when the townspeople jeer at me he will take me safe to the police. And I know that God sets the lowly on high, and those who mourn are lifted to safety when the noose is placed around their necks, and the earth opens up to receive them.

*Rob Mimpriss is the author of Reasoning: Twenty Stories, For His Warriors: Thirty Stories and Prayer at the End: Twenty-Three Stories, and has translated the fiction of Richard Hughes Williams from Welsh.*