

MARS, BONFIRE, MOUNTAIN ASH

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Walking their hosts' dogs through woods near Criafolen, Meirion said to Rhonwen, 'I love you.'

She had the tail end of bronchitis, and her pace had been slow. The two collies had raced back past them up the hill, and Meirion had dropped behind to give them room. As she plodded ahead of him down the track, stepping over tree roots and banks of rotting leaves, he saw how lightly the strands of black hair rested on the crimson wool of her scarf, and something inside him moved him to put his hands on her arms and speak.

Rhonwen heard his confession calmly, neither speaking nor pulling away. He remembered a year before, the first time he took her walking after a service at the church that she attended. When she mentioned past hurts and asked for his patience, her look and posture at that moment had been the same as at this: standing with her face upturned as if to be kissed, her hands hanging unused at her sides. He saw how her breath came in short, deep gasps, and how the retreating blood had left a plastic, unhealthy look to her cheeks. He kissed her forehead lightly and said, 'Let's get you home to the fire. The dogs have been walked long enough, I think.'

'I like it here,' said Rhonwen. 'It's only the rough ground that makes it difficult walking.' At last she seemed to welcome the moment, her small narrow body consenting to his. 'Your friend's wife mentioned a lake.'

'It's where we'd have taken the children, if they'd come. I taught Bethan and Rhys to swim there last summer. Do you want to see it?'

'I thought it was a bit odd of your friend, the way he stopped them coming with us like that.'

‘Cadi had asked him to get them out of the house – there’ll be presents and birthday cake for Rhys when we get back. I don’t think he realised we were taking them.’

The dogs were somewhere out of sight, doing something of interest to dogs. Rhonwen called them in a diffident, un-commanding tone, and for a moment the only sound in that wood was the harsh, forbidding challenge of a crow. He had hoped that she would feel at ease with Cadi, and welcomed by Gerwyn, who had once saved his life, that the weekend would begin to unravel whatever it was that constrained her. But she seemed to be struggling to find her place, and Meirion had spent the weekend so far moved between pride and pity for her. Now she seemed inclined to stand and wait for the dogs to obey, and he had to walk before she walked.

They were passing dense thickets of hazel and birch. Here and there a blackthorn grew among the taller trees, or a holly pushed sharp leaves to brush their shoulders as they passed. But now the path became flatter and broader, and the taller trees thinned to give a sense of the valley they were entering, and glimpses of a pale blue sky. ‘Can we see the lake from here?’ asked Rhonwen.

‘It isn’t really a lake, just a pond on the edge of the woods. It’s out of sight, I think, where the woods are thicker.’

‘Is that where your friend saved you from drowning?’

‘That was years ago as a student, trying to swim the Dardanelles. I started having a seizure, and Gerwyn got me to shore.’

This mention of his epilepsy brought no response. But it filled Meirion with a furtive guilt about his experiment, the doses he had missed and got away with missing, but must now resume before it became too late. Rhonwen had turned, and was watching a thin pleat of smoke from Criafolen a mile away over the crest of the hill.

‘It seems so far from anywhere,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t like to be Cadi, on my own here every day.’

The collies had caught up with them. They seemed to have the lake in mind themselves, for they had adopted a steady trot, pausing only for the slower pace of their masters, or when the dog cocked its leg against a tree. A man crossed the path ahead of them with a fishing rod in his hand; they passed a sign marking the entrance to a nature reserve; and then came the cold grey glint of water between the black trunks of the trees. Meirion summoned the dogs and put them on leads.

‘You can fish here, then?’ asked Rhonwen.

‘Rhys comes here sometimes to fish. You should get him to tell you about it; he’d be pleased.’

They had emerged from the woods on a sweep of gravel track. The ground shrugged itself out of water by degrees, a field of sedge growing out of the muddy shallows. Beyond the far bank a few skinny sheep grazed their winter pasture; a wind-farm with turbines motionless stood on a hill of the whitest green. In the muted pastels of that landscape Rhonwen’s hat and scarf were the only vivid objects. She was standing less than two feet from Meirion, her face half-turned to his. ‘It’s so quiet away from those children,’ she said.

Holding the dogs on tight rein, he had lost the power to touch. The inwardness of her silence, modulated by breathing, the stillness of her face which her fringe of hair guarded, both moved and spoke to him powerfully. She came closer, and rested her hand on his forearm.

‘It was worth the walk,’ she said. ‘That was really special.’

‘Shall we go back through the woods?’

She nodded; he heard the faintest affirmation on her breath. She walked a pace or so behind him until he let the dogs go.

‘We have to go back,’ she said, ‘so I can wrap Rhys’s birthday present.’

The mountain ash that gave Criafolen its name lay by the conservatory Gerwyn was building under the gable end of the house. Looking out of his window in the attic room, Meirion could see across its higher branches towards the bonfire smouldering in a corner of the garden, and a tipi,

which Gerwyn had made for his son, by the gate into the woods not far off. He had left Rhonwen at the door of her room, and gone upstairs to take his medication, and he was standing at the window watching Gerwyn throw chipboard onto the fire when Bethan banged on his door.

‘Mum’s serving tea and cake in the sitting room,’ she said. ‘Rhys is down there already waiting.’

‘I’ll come now,’ said Meirion. ‘Has anyone told Rhonwen?’

‘I told her just now. She was getting changed.’ Bethan eyed his tablets with interest. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I have to take pills regularly, or sometimes I have fits. You’ve heard me talking about it, I’m sure.’

‘I remember,’ said Bethan. ‘I’ve never seen you having a fit.’

‘I hope you never have to,’ said Meirion. ‘Does your dad know there’s tea and cake?’

‘Dad’s *hopeless*. He’s always up a ladder or digging a trench.’ She stood beside him at the window to watch. ‘Me and Rhys are camping in the tipi tonight.’

‘It would be rude to the bonfire not to, wouldn’t it?’ said Meirion.

She gave him a puzzled, disdainful look, and took off down the stairs at a run. Meirion was slower, keeping pace with Rhonwen one floor below. She was in a loose purple skirt he had never seen before, and was holding something in wrapping paper, and he felt a moment of tender pride that she had considered even Rhys in preparing for the weekend. She smiled at Meirion and let her lips touch his, before they went into the sitting room together.

Cadi was kneeling at a coffee table, pouring tea from a pot, and Bethan was lying across an armchair, throwing a cushion up in the air and catching it. Rhys turned towards the door, and hope on his face turned to disappointment when he saw who had come in. ‘He’s *never* here for anything important,’ he said. ‘He *must* do it on purpose.’

‘I’m sure he’s just forgotten he was called,’ said Cadi. She glanced at Meirion with that confiding, desperate look a married woman shows a man who knows her family well. ‘I’ll give him another ten minutes, and then I’ll go and remind him.’

‘I’ll go now,’ said Bethan. She missed the cushion, which fell on the floor with a thud.

‘No, Bethan,’ Cadi said, ‘leave it to me.’ She smiled at Rhonwen apologetically, straightening up and thrusting her feet into crocs. ‘We’re running late,’ she said, ‘but the tea is ready. Come on in and sit down.’

‘I don’t see why you won’t let Bethan go,’ said Rhys. He had thrown himself down on the sofa, arms crossed, but he moved to the end to make room for Rhonwen, who sat beside him, clearing her throat and smoothing the velvety stuff at her knees. ‘He knows it’s your birthday,’ Cadi said; ‘he spent a long time making that tipi. And even Rhonwen has come and brought you a present.’

But watching her, Meirion wondered if she regretted it. The commonplace, cheerful rudeness of family members with each other, Rhys and Bethan’s unthinking friendship and Gerwyn’s sudden entrance to the acclamation of his son, were things she sat through like the rituals of some strange foreign temple. By her own account she had had an unremarkable childhood. She had mentioned family holidays on her mother’s sister’s farm near Carmarthen; she had mentioned violin lessons and eisteddfod competitions. She had looked after her younger sister after school, or taken her to drink tea with her father’s mother, who spoke the true Welsh and corrected Rhonwen’s diction. She had been bullied at school. Sometimes alone with Meirion she seemed to forget herself and be happy, but he paid for those times later, through weeks of withdrawal and silence. And he wondered during those times which of the two of them she was punishing.

Cadi brought the cake, and Rhonwen sang ‘Happy Birthday’ with the others. With the others, she admired Meirion’s gifts to Rhys, a penknife and a hand-powered torch. Her own gift, a jigsaw puzzle that showed a boy leading a horse across a river, created an awkward moment until

Cadi came to the rescue. 'That's like a gift for the whole family,' she said. 'Come the Christmas holidays, we'll all be having fun with that.'

Gerwyn put his arm round Cadi's waist, and gave Rhonwen a shrewd, kind look. 'Rhys will spend what's left of the day looking for things to cut up, and things to shine his torch into,' he said. 'Even my tipi will take second place beside the glory of Meirion's penknife and torch.' He called after Rhys and Bethan, leaving the room, 'Use the chipboard behind the shed if you need to stoke up the fire.'

The adults were left in the quietness, sitting on opposite sofas. Rhonwen gave a small dry cough and crossed her legs, her hands linked shyly in her lap, her foot in its high-heeled sandal nodding towards the door. Cadi was sitting with eyes half closed, her shoulder against her husband's chest. She said contentedly, 'They'll spend the rest of the evening emptying their bedrooms into the tipi, and then an hour after we've gone to bed they'll get cold and have to bring everything in again. Did you enjoy your walk to the lake, Rhonwen?'

'Yes, it was lovely,' said Rhonwen.

'It's a good hearty winter walk, that one. I always come back from there feeling stronger.' She stretched, and stood up to gather teacups and plates.

'You know, I'm really looking forward to that jigsaw.'

She must have felt safe with Cadi, because she followed her into the kitchen to work while Meirion helped Gerwyn move a gas heater into the conservatory, and cover the missing panes with plastic sheeting. And something must have passed to Cadi from her, because when he came back inside to get changed both voices were joined in a hymn. And he heard later that they had agreed to go to morning church together.

They ate in the conservatory, in spite of the cold. Cadi had taken the children's share down to the tipi, and now Rhonwen stood at the table, her pale face stooping into candlelight, filling tacos with beef chilli from a metal dish. The planet Mars hung among the branches of the mountain ash

like a berry, and a breeze found its way round the plastic sheeting to bring the clean, quick scent of apple smoke. Rhonwen sat down beside Cadi, and fingered her glass.

‘You know they’ll come scrounging for seconds?’ said Gerwyn.

‘They won’t,’ Cadi told him; ‘I gave them twice what they can eat. It’s a waste of food, I know, but for one civilised evening it’s worth it.’

‘They’re having a good go with that torch, anyway,’ said Meirion. ‘I can see them waving it round from here.’

‘They’ll have their work cut out for them turning that handle,’ said Cadi. ‘Meri’, I don’t know who served the wine, but you look as though you’re in need of a refill.’

‘Guilty,’ said Gerwyn. ‘I was forgetting Meri’s natural thirst.’ He reached across with the bottle, and Meirion gave up his glass. ‘Where’s the wine from?’ he asked.

‘Family vineyard near Corinth,’ said Gerwyn. ‘We drove back with a couple of crates after the camping trip last summer. We don’t get about as much as you and I used to, Meri, but for a family with children we don’t do badly.’ Meirion picked mince from his lap, and rubbed at the stain. He found himself talking about a summer working on a fishing boat in the Sporades, when he and Gerwyn swam to another island one night, and came up where the turtles were nesting. As he tried to describe the beauty and dignity of those creatures, the sense of awe he and Gerwyn had felt, he noticed Rhonwen push her chair backwards towards the corner, put her hands between her knees and look down.

‘I can’t imagine you and Gerwyn as students,’ said Cadi. ‘You were both so mature and steady when I met you.’

‘We talked wisely and acted rashly,’ said Gerwyn; ‘you might say nothing has changed. Rhonwen, should I turn the heater up? You look as though you’re dying of cold.’

‘I’m warm enough,’ said Rhonwen. She seemed as surprised as anyone at the sound of her voice. She gathered the loose fabric of her skirt to her calves, her eyes lowered, and Meirion became aware that he and Cadi were both watching her, before Gerwyn took the salad with a

clumsy gesture. Something was happening to Meirion; he could feel it. A sick dead taste was in his mouth, a numbness and weakness in his arms and legs; he looked at Gerwyn and tried to call out, and knew he had been silent. Cadi said, 'Let me fetch you a blanket,' and there was a deafening rasp as she moved her chair. The plastic in the doorway was pushed aside with an explosion, and Rhys stood at the table. There was a look of recognition on Gerwyn's face, an expression of fear on Rhys's, and then the seizure overwhelmed him. After unmarked time he felt the cold, and the hardness of the concrete floor against his back. He looked up to where Gerwyn was sitting, his hands on his knees, the lines and shadows of his face exposed by the clinical light of a halogen lamp. 'Keep taking the tablets, Meri,' he said.

He felt exhausted, too weak to move. The time and the place came back to him with shame and a sense of abasement. 'I thought I was free of it,' he said.

Gerwyn put out a hand and Meirion felt his solid grasp as he helped him into a seat. 'Where are the children?' he asked.

'Cadi's putting Rhys and Bethan to bed now. She's told them you're not going to die.'

'And Rhonwen?'

'She said she wanted an early night before church.'

In the following weeks Meirion searched his memory to see if that was the exact phrase Gerwyn had used, if he had been so clear in its attribution, and if there was any tone of voice in which Rhonwen's remark might sound kind.

Months later, after the break-up, he tried to describe to a friend a little of the anger he felt for her. She never said anything, he told him; in all the time we were tearing apart, she never said one meaningful word. 'Perhaps she was talking in her way,' said his friend. 'By the time she'd given you enough reason to leave her, she must have felt exhausted from shouting.' Meirion listened. His expression grew hard. He had heard from friends that she was still going to church, saying little in public and avoiding male company. But if she confided in any of them, no word of it came back to Meirion.

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