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TITLE PAGE

Title:	'Ugly Lovely' - being a work of creative writing with accompanying critical commentary
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DECLARATION

'I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.'

Signed:

Richard J Beynon

September 2012

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

RICHARD BEYNON

DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY IN CREATIVE WRITING

'UGLY LOVELY' – BEING A WORK OF CREATIVE WRITING WITH
ACCOMPANYING CRITICAL COMMENTARY

SUMMARY

The title of the creative work is 'Ugly Lovely'. The 20,000 word critical discussion of the creative piece has no title, other than that it offers a critical consideration of the relationship between the literary composition and contemporary or traditional achievements in the genre.

The creative work concerns a taxi driver named Don, living in the south Wales port of Swansea. He finds his life and culture unsatisfying, but is unable, because of his own lack of will and energy, to leave. His passengers, some of whose lives have an orbit beyond the small-ish Welsh city, bring his sense of dissatisfaction into focus. The work follows a sequence of episodes during which the driver meets and reflects on the remarks and actions of subsequent passengers, and considers his own family and life.

Structurally, the work takes the form of a story-cycle concerning or emanating from Don or from the passengers in his taxi. The passenger narratives sometimes present complete stories or self-contained episodes, sometimes broken or partial narratives. All episodes stand in relief against the other fractured narrative running through the work, the driver's self-reflection and re-evaluation of the family life and up-bringing. Thus:

- 1) **Taxi stories** – involve the characters who step in and out of the taxi. These stories centre upon a cast of characters who enter the driver's working world, but also present to reader the a secondary cast of characters introduced by the passengers, through the stories they tell. The role and status of the driver shifts as the work progresses. At the close of the work, though the driver's future, like the futures of his town and nation, remains unassigned, he approaches it with a firmer sense of purpose (if not direction).
- 2) **Connected family narratives** - gradually present fragments from the history and lives of the main figures in the driver's family. Through these frequently conflicting and contesting narratives, the work delivers a number of perspectives on the history of the town in which the family lived and through which the taxi stories now move. These separate narratives are arranged out of linear sequence, in an order which has greater correspondence to their emotional importance, and in response to triggers set within the various passenger narratives. The contesting nature of the family stories raises questions in the reader's mind about which narratives are privileged, and which reliable. As the work progresses, the realisation comes that none of the narratives is privileged, that all may be unreliable and all contest for dominance and primacy in the driver's mind.

The critical element

In providing a 'critical consideration of the relationship between the literary composition and contemporary or traditional achievements in the genre', this commentary will present

- I. a general introduction to the creative work,
- II. discussion of the narrative form and organisation of the work, comprising:

- a. consideration of the ways that the work is shaped by modernist concerns and structures, particularly those of the modernist 'city novel',
 - b. consideration of the way that the work is structured to present a collection of linked and inter-related narratives, broadly referred to as a short-story sequence
- III. discussion of the extent to which the work can be placed within the canon of Welsh writing in English; in particular:
 - a. the ways in which the work constitutes a recognisable piece of Welsh writing in English and the extent to which it treats the concerns of one of the national literatures
 - b. the ways in which the work makes considered and constructive use of its setting in Swansea.

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Ugly Lovely

Waiting

Waiting. And more waiting. In the bloody rain at the rank and waiting for the bloody trains. Flipping the wipers for the umpteenth time, keeping the engine on for the warmth, smelling the exhaust fumes, the plastic and the damp, and waiting for the punters to appear. Waiting on the early evening trains into High Street station, Swansea.

Swansea. Small-ish as cities go, scruffy in a tidy-ish fashion and, sadly, Welsh in a way that means there's no need to know the language. And wet for a good chunk of the year. Built where the Tawe pours, brown, into the sea between the two big, bare lumps of Townhill and Kilvey Hill, that's the way the place was named, in Welsh: *Aber-tawe*, mouth of the Tawe. A lovely language for landscape and metaphors, Welsh. Visitors love all that, gives them a chuckle, and it gets me a good few quid over the fare every time I tell it.

Town itself spreads out a few miles around the base of Townhill: seashore in front, hill behind, river to the east, dune-lands heading out west through posh-ish suburbs towards Mumbles and the Gower. Like urban lava,

the place looks like it slid off the hill and solidified where it hit the water; all a bit weathered and eroded now. Till the war, town used to be packed full of terraces, narrow as you like, with a cosy little boozer on the corner of each one. And, of course, it was full of people, not just on a Friday and Saturday night, thronged with youngsters reeling from pub to club, pissed and lary on cheap booze, but full of real people, who made and cared for the place.

During the freezing weather of February 1941, the Luftwaffe spent four nights redesigning the centre, turning most of it into big piles of scorched rubble under which lay the roasted bodies of about three hundred people. They missed the docks, which was what they'd come for, and destroyed instead the little houses, the boozers, the town's one posh department store and old St Mary's that stood in the very middle of the place, a lovely clean-lined church of soft brown stone, big and smart, but very much a church, not a cathedral for Swansea.

From the pictures I've seen, St Mary's must've been hit by incendiaries, not explosives. In some of the grainy black and white photos that were taken in the days after the bombing, the church stands tall above the acres of crushed and smoking brickwork all around. There's apparently no damage to her walls and stones, but look a bit closer and she's empty, black inside and utterly roofless, a toothless queen in a broken court. Stayed that way till the late fifties, too; empty, wet with rain and all out of song.

And, for twenty years or more after the war the great areas of crushed brick and stone were slowly levelled to become car parks, then ugly concrete

office blocks and shopping streets were built on top of them. But I wouldn't blame the war for the loss of the lovely old town; it was a war wasn't it? It's what we've done with it since that's the shame. Now the town's a city, and a county, however that works, and it's got a crest and a sense of itself as the deputy capital of Wales. But, to look at, here in the centre it's a mongrel job, a muddle of sixties concrete, seventies steel and glass, and eighties brickwork. All a bit piecemeal, at angles to itself, no smooth lines, threaded through with one-way systems that always take you past the place you want to get to, whichever way you come from. It's an assortment of slabby car parks, a swathe of muddled bus lanes, some dying independent shops, one successful and two struggling shopping malls. And more nightclubs than is good for a place.

But, thank God, through all of this, the market has survived. It'd been there since the 1800s, but was reduced to a smoking iron frame during the blitz. Then, in a rare flash of civic good sense, the heavy suited councillors and aldermen who walked around with Winston after the bombing had the wisdom to rebuild. It's gone from strength to strength and almost every tourist I take around wants to go there – or at least they do when I've had a chance to tell them that they want to.

I love the place. Maybe it reminds me of the old Swansea I never knew, but want back, a Swansea that hung smokily in those books of grey and white photos that I gaped at when I was little, heard about from Gramps and Mam and dad, and still imagine might be there on days when the weather sets in and the place feels like a proper port again. I love it for the life it puts in front of you. I love the fishmongers who have the big red Swansea crabs that fight each

other with banded claws – slow, belligerent, dumbed by the ice, but still full of salty, barnacled anger. I love the great central spread of blue and white Formica tables that hold the cockle and laverbread stalls, where the bosomy women shovel orangey cockles into tubs with great pink hands gripping old white scoops like dustpans. I love the piles of Gower veg and spuds with the reddish earth still on, and the Welsh butchers doing the best bacon there is and pasties that taste just great in the car, parked-up in a lay-by on Townhill looking out over the bay.

When the council planning office doesn't have enough to do, they reorganise the traffic system and fuck everything up for a couple of years. They've got a computer programme somewhere on a two-year loop that churns out one-ways that don't work and lavish traffic light systems that stop-start everything in all directions. There are more traffic lights in the centre of Swansea now than there are proper pubs, and that's an unhealthy ratio.

Going east and over the river, past the old dock entrance and the dockers' club with no dockers but plenty of members still, the dark stone housing terraces climb halfway up onto the barren flanks of Kilvey Hill, a taller, bleaker mound than Townhill. From up there you can look out over the derelict coal yards and the still, brown water of the three remaining docks. Gone the south dock, and the north, the basins where the old cargo steamers swung around, tugs fussing under their sterns. Gone the great Victorian pumping houses that made the black water surge and rise as ships were lifted to match the tides. Gone, too, the exotic ice houses, the dozens of huge redbrick cargo sheds and the acres of railway sidings. No major shipping at all now, except a

ferry service to Cork that steams intermittently along the edge of profitability. Rail lines were ripped up and coal hoists pulled down years ago as the ships went and the docks were filled with hardcore, except a few smaller ones that they filled with little wooden walkways, and shiny white yachts and motorboats. A century and a half of industrial energy just turned grey, stopped moving and drifted away, quietly slipped into history. Now they call it Marine Gate; a couple of the squat goods sheds have been kept and house cafes selling frothy coffee and pricey Paninis. These are corralled by new building of reflective glass and steel that give a home to accountants, solicitors, car dealers and a couple of budget hotels. That's the history of Swansea, set out right there for you. Industrial entropy and service sector energy.

Going west, it's a more prosperous tale. The main road runs along the curved seashore across four miles of what were dunes but are now the university campus, playing fields, houses and a pitch and putt. Then, round, past West Cross to the grey shingle beaches and cliffs where the one-time fishing village, now posh-ish suburb of Mumbles hangs onto the side of the headland. People laugh at the name if they've never heard it before, but growing up there, it just seems normal to me. It used to be called Oystermouth, and still is by older locals.

The bay in front of Mumbles was the world's biggest oyster fishery in the 1700s, before they started mining and smelting up the Swansea valley and pouring all the waste down the poor old Tawe. The river valley and most areas of the bay became toxic and stayed that way for a hundred or so years, and the oysters are long gone. If you go up the valley even now, there are stretches

where nothing grows, and even in Mumbles area, along the front there are council notices telling the tourists not to eat the cockles off the beach; the locals wouldn't bloody dream of it.

Two more or less bare lumps of grey rock rise out of the sea where Mumbles head forms the final curve of the bay. On the outer island sits a stumpy little lighthouse, like a half-burned candle in a birthday cake. And always round the deserted, automatic lighthouse, cawling gulls circle, indistinct in drizzly weather, like smoke drifting from the little, snuffed candle.

It's all nearly two hours into Wales from the Severn Bridge, an hour and a bit west of, and, some say, years behind, Cardiff. Poor old Swansea; named by the Celts, taken, fortified and stripped clean by the ruling bloody English for centuries and then given back to the poor bloody Welsh when the land's poisoned and the coal's all gone. The big problem is that there's no capital grandeur, no red tarmac around the Guildhall like in Cardiff, not even a decent castle ruin to speak of, and, now, no bloody industry either. No, Swansea's just a little bit too far down the road from the bridge and Cardiff. It's an hour on from Cardiff down roads that seem as if they're running out of puff the further they get from the rest of the world - which means London and Cardiff. So, when you get here now, instead of civic dignity, there's a road system that doesn't take you anywhere, a muddle of shopping streets crammed with bars but barely a shop, all fronted by the dimmest shadow of the docks that made the place. Echoes and shadows.

Quick One

Ah, here we are then. Out come the punters, in dribs and drabs at first, and then a steady stream. The five-fifteen from Paddington; disgorging its passengers. A couple of local boys out first, eager, glad they're home, back on solid ground, but not wanting to show it. Out from the entrance, wait, find the familiar faces, then hugging and kissing, arms around the wife and kids, telling all about big business and the funny way they do things in the smoke up the line. Car park for them. No fares there.

Old couple then, him carrying the bags, a thin, straining claw around vinyl handles, her following, tired, sheepish in the bustle. What's it been, I wonder? A week at the daughter's in Newport while Tommy's case is heard. He goes down for four, but at least they've been there for her, been there with her, given her the strength to see sense and a solicitor and begin proceedings. Give it a month and she'll be arriving here too, with her life packed up into four cardboard boxes, and beginning all over again, just where it started. Beaten, they shuffle out, with just the energy to get to the line and into Des's cab at the front.

There's the odd student home for the weekend to see his mum and the washing machine, got more or less enough for a packet of fags and the bus fare before he taps the old man tonight. Nothing there worth having. A couple of squaddies next, all knuckles, shoulders and tats, back for forty-eight lovely hours of mam and dad and gran and Sunday roasts and pints and pints and

fucking pints. And fighting. They'll be straight into the Commercial over the road to have a wet before they ring and say they're home.

And then at the back is a crowd of suits, a mass of dark blue and grey, with smart overnight cases, down from Reading, Swindon, or somewhere just as foreign. Out they come, steady steps, gazing through the twilight for the rank, not at all troubled by the relocation, but deliberate, methodical, getting their bearings in this one city that's just like all the others they pitch up in three or four times a week.

Into first and shuffle up the queue, slow we all go, very slow, turn by turn, exhaust clouds hanging in the air, fan belts squealing with the damp. Doors open, instructions given, bags stowed, slam slam slam, and off.

Then, for me, a pair of striding polished shoes, a suit creased from three hours in First, nice briefcase and one slick bit of luggage. Face down at the window;

"Evening. Dolphin Hotel, please."

And before I can move to get out and open the boot, he's done both doors, got the suitcase up here by me, and he's in the back with the briefcase on his lap. Which is ok. Decent fare, keeps me in town, where it's getting busy now. Lawyer, I'd guess, London accent – or posh, anyway. Tidy in the car, bit quiet, but then he's been on the train all evening instead of going home to Kingston or Surbiton or wherever it is he nests at night. Anyway, he's happy to be in the car and more than likely he's tipping on expenses when we get there.

"Six-forty that'll be, then, please..."

"Thanks. Take for nine, would you, and give me a receipt?"

So I get two-sixty, he gets the receipt for nine and a blank for luck, and the pound that's left he can drop that into the charity box on the reception counter, so the receptionist'll think he's a sweetie not a wanker like most of them, and give him a room with a nice sea view. Job done tidy all round, and I'm back on the rank in fifteen minutes.

Into the line again and looks like I'll get a few minutes reading in this time, cos the crowds have thinned a bit. I get the Lawrence out from under the seat, ready to dig into the Morels and feel some of that northern grit, but the line does a stop-start shuffle, and back under the seat goes Literature.

Sliding forward, round towards the top of the line, it's the frontage that takes my eye; beautiful stone, you've got to say, never mind its huffy-puffy origins. This station, where I seem to spend half my life queuing for fares, is very grand, a symbol of something reached for but now gone, built in the days when the coal, the zinc, the copper and iron still roared and poured money down the valley. It's all white stone, lovely sharp lines with squared-off porches and angular blocks all over the place; daftly over-blown for this old town, too clean, too modern, too hopeful - but lovely all the same. Still creamy-white, it glows, even in this dismal, drizzly light. Half the wet Welsh winter long, it warms and lifts this end of town like a great big soft lamp.

And, it's a damn shame now, when you get close up to it, you can see that it's lost a lot of the smoothness in its skin, and patches have gone grey with the soot from a hundred years of steam trains, and half a century of blokes like me queuing for fares under the porch, pumping out diesel and four-

star. It's got urban acne now, pockmarks all over, because the modernist look wasn't up to the smog and soot that comes with Swansea's past. The money that funded this lot, that gave Swansea any kind of name, was made by mining, smelting and casting ores up in the Valleys above Swansea, loading the clouds with just enough caustic soup to make this Portland stone hiss and sizzle under each and every raindrop. But, even though it's got a bit less flesh on its bones, and it's a bit less snowy than when they cut the ribbon and clapped their calf-skinned hands all those years back, it's still a beauty and a light in this upper bit of a sinking town.

Mikey

Here's the next one. I didn't see him come out; must've been away with myself, switched off and in one about this bloody stonework. Getting old, or soft or some bloody thing. I missed him coming over to the car, and it gave me a bit of a shock when he got in. Big feller, huge beard, face clamped to a phone. He gave me the address, up in the Glenpool, and I remember thinking very nice, should be a bob or two in it, and then I eased out and headed down High Street.

Not a bad run, down to Glenpool, out of town and west along the Mumbles road, to where the money is. The town has always been full of houses and businesses, crammed in together around the bottom of Townhill, squeezed between the steep slopes and the sea, back to the hill, toes on the beach. The older bits fan out from the docks and river, the newer bits are slap in the middle now, after the centre was bombed flat during the last war. Highlights? Well, not many really: a flash new football ground – but a team that's falling down the divisions as fast as it went up; a big market, still working; St Mary's church slap in the middle of town, soft red-brick, deserted; a criss-cross of shops, cheap and nasty; my old station, lovely; then the terraced houses stretching around from the docks, old and grey, industrial. In the west, there's a bit more space, room for the Patti Pavilion, a few tennis courts, and the parks that were the gardens of the gentry who ran the ironworks and foundries that gave the place its life for a hundred years till the first war. Brown-brick Barratt

executive crescents are there too now, filling the gaps, every available space under the brick.

Keep heading west down the bay, only a couple of miles, and you're out past the university and into the big detached houses, all bay windows, double fronts, with yuccas and monkey puzzles in long gardens. And then, it's on through Blackpill with its sad little lido, still packed when there's a glimmer of sun, past West Cross and Norton, the tidy suburbs, and into Mumbles, the pretty stopper on the neck of the bay, cottages all jumbled and precarious up the cliff. It looks like a real fishing village, though there's not been any real fishermen or fishing here since the war. Lots of tarty cottages, dinghies and speedboats along the front now, but there are still a good few guesthouses and, thank god, the dozen or so pubs hang on from thirstier days.

As the bay spreads east to west towards Mumbles, so the roads get wider, the trees get taller, the houses get grander, and the grass is truly greener, and there's not a valley in sight. Glenpool is one of the greenest bits of all, about half a mile past Mumbles, up over the back of the headland on the steep Newton road: no fisherman's cottages there, all detached houses, huge drives, tennis courts. Comfy. Some modern, lots built in the Edwardian period and then another batch from between the wars. I bet there's a greater density of Agas per square mile there than in most of the rest of Wales put together. Dentists, solicitors, dodgy bank managers and sharkey company directors; only the well groomed and heeled need apply.

As I pushed out of town, the streets were dark, but getting busier, with the punters beginning to start their trips to the second pub of the night.

Nothing in it for us, cos they only shift a street or two between bars, but it makes the place look busy. It was all big, swirling bunches of people, ten or twelve girls going one way, six or eight boys going the other. Eyeing, joking, leering, laughing, but too early yet for merging, pairing off and parting.

Breaking down, joking, teasing, necking, all that'll come later when the drinks've hit. Till then, each gang'll be determined, set on a joint course of action, making a slow and steady progress, like one of those giant jellyfish you see on the nature programmes. Then one at the back will shout,

"Naa! Sod the Crown, mun, let's go down the Daffs, they got vodka shots till ten..."

And round they'll swing, laughing and yelling, heading off the other way, the front now the back, leaders left powerless, wind gone from the sails as the others head after the shouter. And all around town, the pace is upped as the booze starts to work against the cold.

Boys in shirts brave it out between the pubs, walking fast, but never a run, hiccoughing as guts tighten with the chill. Girls, legs blue with cold, go as fast as the shoes will let. They push out of normal, carpeted boozers with tellies and pensioners out for a quiet pint, where rum is cheap and pool is free, and on, into the heart of things, to the cavernous bars that were the banks, all polished floors, blue lighting and bouncers on the door. Groups challenge, eye-up, merge and fall apart as the targets get clearer, or more blurred, the noise intense now and the blood moves quick.

He spent most of the time on his phone, first a couple of work calls – normal sort of stuff I hear a dozen times a day - yes, got the document, will email in the morning, yes, talk to Dave in corporate accounts... that kind of stuff. Then, very flash, one long call in French. Seems peculiar, but it's rare, really, to get French. I can't tell them all, but I get a lot of Chinese, plenty of Urdu, odds and sods of Spanish and Portuguese from South America, and more recently the deep funeral tones of Russia and the Baltic from the heavy men off the sleek gas boats. I hear so much I can do a bit myself now. Not anything like conversation, but the odd funny phrases that someone's taught me over the years. Always makes the boys off the oil boats laugh when I can drop in something from back home, even if it comes with a Taff tinge.

But French; that only really comes with a few yachting crews in the summer, and they're few and far. We're too far round, facing away from Europe, staring out into the hazy Atlantic instead of looking across the narrow channel. There used to be French aplenty in Wales, though; Bretons, they were, so they were Celts like us, tough stumpy men who looked like they'd lived outdoors for a hundred years. Every year in the summer they'd come over and cycle about, selling onions. Gramps and Mam used to buy from them when I was little, and all the folk down here called them the shonionionmen. At five, I couldn't work out how they got their onions, because you'd always see them with eight or ten strings of onions, great golden-white things, slung around their shoulders and the handlebars of the big iron bikes. So, did they cycle back

to Brittany to get more every time Mam or Mrs Davey next door bought a string?

Impressive, I always think, that switching in and out of tongues. Straight into it he went, no mucking about with 'Bonsoir Claude, it's me Bill,' in half English to let the other fella know not to go too fast at the start. Sounded good too, smooth and at home with it.

We were almost there, just going up into the Glenpool, on Herald Lane, where all the pines form that avenue, when he leant forward. I could see he was looking at me, but the streetlight's dim there with all the trees, so I couldn't tell what his expression was. I knew he wasn't going to be a problem or anything, not like some of them who start to gaze at you when they're pissed - then you know you've got a bit of bargey coming. No, he just leant ever so slightly forward, intent like. And all the way up Herald and into the Paddock, where the very big new houses sit on a slope looking over the road, he carried on.

I was just looking for the right number, struggling to see any of the little brass plaques on the gateposts, when he said

"It's just up there on the left, Donald, the white one with the black gates."

Jesus! I hadn't been called Donald by anyone now for years. It's what everyone called me in school, DonDuck, Donald-boy, or sometimes, specially to piss me off, it was Donny. But for years now, since I've been back and been driving, it's always Don or Donno. I pulled up sharp by the big gates, and took

a good look, over my shoulder like. I could see him grinning in the soft street lighting, and couldn't understand how I'd not clocked him before. I reached up quick and put the cab light on; yes, of course, it was Mikey. It was Mikey alright, grinning daftly, a bit sheepish at being studied.

"Good God, mun, it's Mike, isn't it? Mikey, Mikey bloody Rolands! How are you? I didn't spot you, all that fur on your face, the tan, and the suit. Grizzly Adams I thought I had in here. Jesus mun. Must be . . . six – no, seven, years?"

"Oh all of that," he chuckled. "How are things then? What're you up to, Don?"

"Ooh, you know, sweating for a crust, keeping the taxman happy, but he's about the only one... What about you? You moved away after uni didn't you? I heard you just now, on the phone; it's France, then, is it?"

"No, not France. Funny, but that's about the only place I haven't been. Oil I'm in, Don. No oil in France; the oil's only in the god-forsaken bits, the places where you don't want to live. No, the call was to our office in Belgium. Dutch company I work for, based in Brussels; geology and seismic stuff. Finding out where we think the black stuff is, and then drilling little holes to see. If it's there, then a whole load of other buggers come in, drill a bigger hole, and bingo, the cars can run for another ten years. Then off I go to some other dusty shit hole and do it all again, before another well runs dry. So, you see Don all my sweat is just to keep buggers like you on the road!"

He reached forward and gave my shoulder a mock punch, which numbed my arm to the wrist.

"I'm in Saudi at the moment, been there four months, but back now for couple of weeks. Christmas with the folks... You know."

And I remembered, all in a rush. He'd been a star in the sixth form, one of the high fliers. Maths, physics and chemistry, all A's, then off to Imperial College. Yup, a sure-shot for the top grades was Mikey.

I tried to remember when I'd last seen him, and figured it probably had been before I came home. So, that meant, what, six, maybe seven years? I remembered one Christmas a few years after we left school, and we bumped into each other in the Founders. I remember him saying he was in oil or geo-chemistry or bio-something. And I remember telling him how lousy quantity surveying at Lancashire Poly was, yelling to tell him just how crap it had been above the noise from the swirling, smoky mass of red faced boozers. I think I could remember, afterwards, down at the other end of the pub, feeling a bit sad, a bit let down really at how we'd just lost track of each other, how we'd never kept up. But maybe I hadn't.

He was waiting, and I'd missed a question.

"You what, Mikey..?"

"Just wondered what you were up to? You went off to Leeds didn't you – or was it Leicester..?" and then he paused, a bit awkward, sort of looked for his words in the foot-well. "I mean, what're you up to now?"

"Uuh, no, not Leeds; not even Leicester; Lancashire. Poly. Big difference. Hated it, crap course, crap place, crap time. Full of blokes with loud voices and sports bags. Rained more than here. Came home in the second year when Mam

got ill and I... Well, I sort of stayed put really, after she died, you know, to sort stuff out..."

"Oh, sorry Don, I hadn't heard about your Mum. That's a shame, Donno. Did you go off again?"

"To uni? No, no, not really. Went travelling, like: knocked about in Spain a bit, a few months in India, did a couple of months in Thailand too, but came back... here... really. And, at the moment, I'm doing this, just sorting myself out. Just getting some cash together, - you know."

"Oh, aye..."

I could tell he wanted to go. He was pulling the bags together and had the door open.

"Look, Donno, I'm going to be down the Founders a few nights next week, you know, escaping the folks, getting out of the festive season. Let's have a pint. Will you ?"

"Yeah. That'll be great, Mikey. Uh, okay, yeah. I'm off Thursday and Friday..."

"So, Thursday then, 'bout eight? Take care, see you then, Donno."

He put a tenner on the seat, for the seven-twenty on the meter.

"Hang on, Mikey, the change..."

But he was out, shouting something about getting him one back at the boozer. And off he went, up the smooth, sloping drive, wagging a hand over his shoulder.

Sheena

I sat in Glenpool, at the end of Mikey's road, for a good five minutes. It'd shaken me somehow, seeing him; I don't know why, but it was like bumping into myself or seeing an old photo I didn't know someone had taken. I wasn't really thinking anything clear, just feeling the years that had passed.

Eventually, the radio brought me round, with Sheena's voice telling me there was nothing more for me, all quiet, and asking did I want to head back. So, still only half there, I eased back through town and headed up and round the back of Townhill towards Cowyn.

Cowyn isn't really a place, more of a bit of un-developed land between other places. There used to be a smelter here in the eighteen hundreds, a few hundred houses, a pair of bleak looking chapels and a catholic church. And seven or eight pubs. A railway branch line came up from town and connected to the Swansea Valley line, for the coal I guess. Years ago the smelter went cold, the houses started emptying as people went off for work elsewhere, and eventually the pubs died too. It all got torn down after the war, and nobody's found anything to do with it. A couple of acres of barren nothingness, permanently in the shadow of Townhill, cut in half by the railway line that now goes to Llanelli and on down the coast to the west. The ground is still littered with clinker and little gobbets of hardened molten iron, dense, rounded lumps like bluish pebbles. So that's where we're based, in a gravelly compound that fronts the road, backs onto a filthy old stream that runs oily over stones until it

dribbles down a culvert that takes it under town and down to the Tawe. For neighbours we've got the Cowyn working men's club on one side, and one of the chapels on the other. It's a carpet warehouse at the moment. The boss says the spot's ideal, by which he means cheap. And, in some ways, he's right. It's a big space for the twenty or so cars, a couple of portacabins for us and the girls, and enough passing trade to make a few bob when there are no booked jobs. We get plenty of business out of the club, and we're just far back enough from town for the drunks who started walking home to Penlan and Cadle to realise it's cold and too far, so in they come, into the front cabin, where they stamp their feet by the fan heater and try to look like they won't put ten pints and a kebab all over the back seats.

Nine-ish. The boys'll be heading back to the office from all over the town now. Twenty Mondeos and Cavaliers, plus the odd Merc, all bearing down on a wire-ringed compound in Cowyn, not quite the official, but certainly the locally recognised arse-end of town. I know it's cheap to get a yard in Cowyn, but what the boss saves on rent he must be paying out double in padlocks, barbed wire, insurance and floodlights.

All those cars, drawing back from the rain-damp, orangey town centre of mid evening. It'll be empty of shoppers down there now, past the pub-crawl slot, but yet to fill with the pissed and partying around the clubs, so home the old fellas run, just taking that last train job and calling it a day at twelve hours, getting out of it and home before the pubs have chance to fuel anyone up too much. The young ones and the ones in debt hang on in the warm for a spell in the office with a mug of something from the vending machine and a meal from

the chippy, before they head out to take on the night and all its slurring, shapeless cargo.

The old boys will nose through the tall wire gates and onto the rough gravel yard, wincing and slowing for a second as the arc lights split the dark. Under the hard orange electrochrome they'll fill the tank and give the dash a bit of a wipe, then up onto the concrete apron under the cover, leaving the doors gaping for the boys to Hoover. They'll dodge the stripes of water sluicing off the corrugated roof, step a careful path over pocked and oily gravel, and into the smoky warmth of the cabin.

"Not stopping, Sheena, Love. Tea'll be waiting," they'll call as they wipe feet, slot jobsheets into racks, and keys onto hooks. But they will stop and they will chat, and back home the wife knows full well, so nothing burns.

Ten minutes or so they'll spend, having a cuppa with Jen in the office, who's just finished herself, and leaving the night to Sheena. Then, out and over the gravel yard again to their own cars that've sat there all day. Tatty, unloved Escorts and Astras, wings of different colours, lots of filler and duck tape round the bumpers, lots of sagging seats and coat hangers making do for aerials. Always made me laugh that has: we spend a hundred hours a week driving decent cars, trying to earn enough to live, and when we've done it, we end up going home in sheds that the council would take off the road if they had a badge on.

It'll be a slow, chugging start for most of them in this weather. Behind Townhill the damp weather always sits down hard and stays put at this time of year. The fog hangs around for days, even when the sea has blown it off the

town on the front side of the hill. Clouds build up slow and heavy over the Bristol Channel, drag themselves up Townhill, slump over the top and down into Cowyn and all the estates that spread around the backside of the hill.

Yup, they all head off on a night like this with chokes full out, exhaust pipes spewing white mist into the damp dark as they beetle out of the shadow of the hill to enjoy the little slice of the day that forms their private lives.

The twelve-hour boys'll be blinking in the mist and the coppery glaze of the streetlamps, tired eyes trying to sort shapes from shadow, glare from glaze in darkness now that they've driven through for the second time today. The older ones will just be admitting to themselves that maybe now, yes, just maybe in this light, this weather, they might need to get some glasses. But, when they get home, they'll do bugger-all about it. A couple of years later and the bumps will start happening, nothing big at first, just a misjudged swing out of a parking spot, a wrong angle on a tight turn, but the wings'll get clipped, and the bumpers will start to show the scuffs that the wash boys can't polish out. And as they grow in size and seriousness, get more regular, the boss will start to dock pay and get ratty about it. Then, and only then, they'll trot off to Specsavers with the missus. Unless they're unlucky and they leave it too late till a pissed up stag-nighter suddenly heads for the kebab van over the road without looking, one dark, wet Welsh evening.

When they'd all gone, and I'd sorted out the car, I sat and had a chat with Sheena. She's not an easy woman to get to know, and some of the boys find her a bit sharp-like, but you can't blame her, the poor cow, sat in that

cabin day on day, night after night, nothing to do but chivvy us lot over the radio, and choose which part of the grey mound to bury her fag ends in. Rain pissing on the roof and wind blasting the door, she sits there all night on her tod except for the swaying drunks and driftwood from the night's tide. In the night, it's always kept cold on the punters' side of the grill, freezing fucking cold, 'cos it stops them trying to shelter in there and it means they sober up a bit before they get in the cars. But poor old Sheena's sat there all night on her side of the grey steel screen, with both bars on, fag smoke dangling in the damp air. No wonder she's got purple fucking legs. Purple legs, hands like a docker, face all traced with lines of shot vessels and a voice that'd take barnacles off a boat when she's cross. But a heart and soul of gold, our Sheena, and don't any of you piss-heads try to touch her or give her lip or we'll, every one of us, rip your fucking arms off.

She had a do with the bloke that started the company, donkey's years ago, and they even lived together for a bit. Her and him in his four bed executive townhouse up in that development where the tinsplate works used to be. She wore short skirts, gave him most of the redundancy she got from the bus company, and took almost no pay for three or four years to keep the money in the company. But it was worth it and they shared, and she was always just on the verge of becoming the manageress of the car hire side of the business that he was always just about to start. She waited and stayed poor while he spent money faster than we all earned it.

Finally, he got us all together to tell us he was selling the business, one Friday morning. Freezing cold, all of us out there on the forecourt of the

garage, cos we couldn't fit in the office, and him having to shout above the howling gale. He was one of those blokes, even when he shouted, even when he talked to a big group, he sounded like he was talking just to you. A plausible, slimy bastard.

Cash flow, the banks, petrol prices, the supermarkets, red tape and the council. Honest toil, local boy trying to put a bit back, making opportunities for people like us and they've tossed it in his face. Hard decision, he'd agonised, cried over it, after all, he'd put everything he had into this, into us... But for the good of it all, so that we'd be looked after, he'd taken the offer, sold up.

She'd no idea, nearly keeled over as he said it, had to hang onto one of the pumps, and went pale as the concrete we were standing on. No, not crying. Really, she said, she was fine. Yes, yes, they'd discussed it all fully, last night, this morning, had complete trust in his judgement, just her eyes watering in the wind. By Monday he was in Bristol with the bar manageress from the club next door, and Sheena was homeless. All our cheques bounced that Thursday and they towed half the cars away over the weekend. Never heard what he did after that, probably still working his way through a trail of businesses and Sheenas.

Still, got to talk the business up, whoever owns it and us. Sheena'd stayed around the business even after it went down and the boards went up and she had to move into something temporary with her mum. Not that anyone would've known it was a business by that time, just a bit of land with a dry petrol station, and a taxi rank with no running cars. Can't see what the hell she kept in her head to look after. She must've cared about it, or felt it still had

something for her – and 'spose it did really, after she'd handed over all that money to get it up and going. But, that was the thing, she didn't really make a claim on the money, the whatsits, the assets. She just sort of hung about, like a crow does with stuff on the road, watchful, hopping out of the way now and then, but being near, keeping an eye on it, though never getting much from it.

So, when the new bloke borrowed enough to make himself respectable and opened it all up again, she was there. Don't know how she even knew it would happen, but she was there. And there she was still, Sheena the faithful, Sheena being busy down the radio, Sheena giving us grief for being late. Sheet-steel on the counter and mesh on the windows, big yellow map on the wall, a grubby neon tube up above, and just the sticky blue carpet tiles to make the place comfy.

The Founders

I thought I'd take the car down the Founders, because I'd only be staying for one, say two, at the most. You know, show willing; a couple of pints, a bit of blather about the old times with Mikey, then off. After I'd dropped him off that afternoon, I'd thought about it all the way back to the base, and reckoned at first that I wasn't really that bothered about meeting up. I told myself that I hadn't seen him for bloody yonks, and as far as I was concerned, he'd not really been a close-close mate even when we'd been in the same class. We'd always moved across different groups of friends and of course, he'd lived in Glenpool, when I was just a simple Mumbles boy – and that was a bit before Mumbles got posh and all the terraces had stripped pine doors.

But, when it came closer to Thursday, I did remember that we'd seen eye to eye on a lot of stuff really, and we'd been out on the piss a good few times over the years, never with other mates, but somehow just the two of us. Looking back on it, and I can't work out why or how it happened, but I do remember a load of nights with me and him weaving around the village to the pubs where they served under age, laughing like twats, pooling the cash and being big whenever there were girls.

On one long summer night, outside the Antelope, we met two girls we knew vaguely from school, both, helpfully, called Sue. We were in the sixth form, first year, feeling very grown up and clever. They were a bit older, came from town and had gone off to the Tech college for 'secretarials' after their O-

levels. Mam would have a word for them, and would've had a view about the length of their skirts. Mikey and I just saw them as icing on the cake of a long lager-fuelled night. We gathered them up, full of bravado, Mikey leading the way, and went from pub to pub, trying to get as much vodka and fresh air down them as we could before last orders. They went off to the loo together when we were in the White Rose, and Mickey gripped my arm and hissed:

"How much dosh have you got left?"

"I dunno, about four quid or so..."

"Arrright, then with my three, we've got enough for another round. Make theirs doubles. We haven't got enough to get into Bentleys without another fiver, so grab a few cans and let's see if we can get down on the beach."

So it went. Ten minutes later, heart thumping, I walked with Sue Two behind Mikey and his Sue, who were already arm-in-arm. It seemed to be going brilliantly; Mikey was full of charm and confidence, the Sues were laughing and easy, and I loped along, grinning like a madman. Then, just as we turned into the square by the seafront, the girls stopped. Oh God, I thought, here it comes, we're going to start necking and the Sues are up for it.

"Okay boys. Thanks a lot like. Our lift's here now, better rush or he'll get cross. Tarra."

And over the road, in a white transit was Dad one, or perhaps Dad two. *Bennett's Plastering*. Hands like shovels on the wheel, arm like a tree trunk on the door. Watchful. Big. Watching us. Even Mikey was lost for words.

And, when we were younger, before girls came on the scene, I can remember summer evenings going swimming down Caswell bay, and then lying around on Llangland golf course getting pissed on flagons of cider. And, I can remember very well the night we got pissed on cans of Skol in the hut on the golf course, then walked for hours in the drizzling darkness, going from green to green wedging an empty can in each hole.

But I don't know how all that happened, 'cos I never have thought of him as a close mate, just as one of the blokes who were around. But, when it came down to it, when I stopped to think, I reckoned that we had had a few times together, and he was a tidy boy back then, so I should go and see him, just for for a couple. And he seemed keen in the car, and I'd sort-of said I would, and I was off on the Thursday. So, eventually, I reckoned, what harm could it do?

I knew how it'd be. The Founders is popular, always a good pint, lots of decent sized tables in alcoves so you could get out of the crush, no TV, a cracking jukebox, and tidy bar-staff. Heaven, really. But that's its drawback. It's a local to people like me who live down the village, but then it's also a nice place to visit for groups from town wanting an occasional trip out, and it's a stopping-off place for people who want to meet up locally, down a few sharpeners then head for the expensive bars up in town where every vodka shot sets them back two hour's wages. So, for blokes like me who want a quiet pint, it's a matter of choosing the right time. Between five and seven, no problems, but after that it'd be packed till the parties head off up town. After

nine, nine-thirty, no problems again. So, meeting Mikey at eight would mean a bit of elbow dancing at the bar and a double round to save time.

On Thursday, knowing what tended to happen with Mikey I made sure I had a solid lunch. At seven, I started to get ready. It was only as I was getting into the car that I clocked the fact I was actually going to be early: I'd gotten ready and out of the flat in twenty minutes. Never early, me. Well, not for anything outside the job, that is. I've never ever been late for a call, or missed a booking, even the three-forty-fives and four-fifteens to Cardiff airport aren't a problem. But, out of work, it slips a bit. Not sure why, but I always seem to end up leaving for the place I'm meant to be, at the time I'm meant to be there. I spend all bloody day getting people places, and I can work out to a minute, by the time of day, the journey time to almost anywhere in south Wales, yet I can't get myself down the pub or round to a mate's on time. Gramps was the same, Mam said. They used to joke that his feet would turn up ten minutes after he put them in the tops of his trousers each morning.

So, more than half an hour early, I pulled up opposite the Founders. It's in a backstreet, just off the Newton road, so it's usually easy enough to get a space. Two more paces, and I shoved open the door of the public bar to let that lovely warm, smoky fug swish over my face. Ciggy smoke, beer, wet wood, damp coats, people. And it was all hubbub and chatter inside. I edged my way around the crowd at the bar until I got to a gap, and leant in. Derek spotted me from the other end and motioned towards the Bass tap. I nodded, with a palm-up V. Three minutes later, I was over in an alcove, pint and a quarter gone and the atmosphere soaking in nicely.

Lots of pre-Christmas parties were coming and going, not many of them local. It was the usual works party stuff, all edging into the place, standing in a huddle, fiddling with their coats and looking sheepish like someone was going to challenge them about their age or tell them off for being in a pub instead of in the office. There were three groups I could see, each one awkward at first, easing up a bit on round number two, then getting louder and more gabbly by the third drink, blokes telling stories, talking loud, over-confident, women giggling and teasing them a bit, but still looking around the place and not quite at ease. All the men were settled in twenty minutes, revelling, expansive, loud, out for a night of it; a fair number of the women were wondering how quick they could make an out and be home. Taxis came and groups went.

"Car for Edwards... Up to Town is it?"

"Aright, 'Drive, be with you in a minute. Two seconds mun, we'll be there."

Quick downing of pints, glasses banged on the bar,

"Go'night. Taaraa, thanks. See you again."

And they tumbled out, trying loudly now in the little terraced street to fit six into a car for five. Lots of shrieking, some covert fumbling and a bit of jockeying for front seat leadership. Whoever got the front seat would direct the next bit of the evening, would shape the nine till ten slot, before they lost pace, fell back into the pack, and let a new leader emerge from the beery fog. The driver would be good humoured about all this, figuring on a bit of a tip at this stage if he let them have Menna from accounts on Harry the rep's knee. No point in being nice later on, because none of them have enough money left for

a tip later, so get it now, while it's all going nicely and the cops aren't so bothered about the number you're carrying. All in a night's work, satisfied customers and tip in the pocket, job done tidy all round.

I was fixed on the comings and goings for a while, then I looked up and Mikey was standing there, with his huge paws wrapped around a pair of pints, grinning like a trout.

"Hiya matey. Corr, I thought you wouldn't be here for a bit. Get one of these down you then," he boomed, shoving the table over a bit with his boot and parking himself next to me.

I'd forgotten just how big a fella he was – not fat at all, but broad, tall and strong. And those years knocking around the world's rough spots seemed to have broadened him out even more. I'm not small, but he made me feel like a little boy next to him as he expanded over the table, huge hands around his pint pot. Well, if it got any more crowded in here, he could go and get the rest of the pints.

So much for only staying for two. By the time I'd finished the pint I had, and sunk the one Mikey bought, it was my shout, for fairness's sake, but then of course he wanted to get one back . . . and so, the evening was firmly on the conveyor belt towards last orders.

We talked fast and easily and I quickly remembered just how much I liked Mikey, and how much we had hit it off when we'd knocked around together. He had an easy, humorous way with him, fired out some good one-liners, and played around with words and their meanings. But he didn't just

joke and clown; if the topic was serious, he listened well, seemed to think about what I said, and thought about what he said before it came out.

We covered almost everything, weaving our way around the years, gee-ing each other on to dig up stories about everyone we could remember from school, from the village, and from those days down the bays and nights in the pubs. We ran through the lists of all the blokes we'd liked, all the blokes we'd thought were tossers, and those very few dark characters who used to scare us shitless when we were seventeen. Then, with a bit more gusto, four pints in now and warming to the task, we did the girls. We re-created the teenage Siâns, Janes, Sarahs, Mennas, and Julies who had moved among us, stirring up the hormones, then retreated just the other side of that glass wall we spent so much of our time gazing through, but never getting over. We remembered fondly the girls we'd mucked around with, but never really fancied, we egged each other on to remember the ones we'd fancied so much but never told, and we sympathised with each other over the brush-offs from the very few we'd fancied and told.

"Ah well, bless'em all, and every one," Mikey says, raising his pint. "They've got husbands and kids and tidy semis now, or careers and designer flats up the marina." And he gazed at me, mock-serious over the beer. "They are steady people, good people, settled people, Donno, and not for the likes of us wanderers."

On pint six, when we'd finished rounding up all the tidy boys and beautiful girls, and having a laugh at the misfortunes of the bad bastards, we started telling each other stories about ourselves, filling in alternate lines, and

lashing up the comedy, the risks, the heat, the cold, the waves, the cliffs, the cars, the length of the days and the roar of the pissed-up evenings.

By the time Derek had called last orders for the third time, and time twice, and after he'd given us a couple of shorts when the others had gone, and when he'd come back downstairs after taking the cash up to the safe, we had to face up to it: the Founders was shut.

We reeled out of the pub, whooping and hiccoughing as the cold salt air tightened our guts and bit into our lungs. Good as gold, I ignored the car, and without a word to each other, we headed down to the front. It was a bit of a wobbly route, and we had a bit of a stop while Mikey had a piss against the wall at the back of the Co-op, but in ten minutes or so, jackets done up tight against the cold, we ended up by Bondy's. Bondy has been selling fish and chips on the seafront at Mumbles since I was a tiny boy to my knowledge, and local legend has it that he was there, steam pouring out of the little galvanised chimney in the top of the van, when the Vikings sailed up the Bristol channel. "Sixty-five cod and chips is it Gunnar? Tidy. Salt and vinegar's on the shelf, lads."

As we sat, side-by-side in a shelter like two sixteen year olds on a wet evening, shovelling the hot, greasy chips into our mouths, we talked about all the places that Mikey'd been. He told me about the weird life of compounds and rigs and settlements, a year here, six months there, on and off planes, in and out of continents. He only ever spent time getting the sites going,

establishing the projects, and as soon as the oil started to flow, he was off, and into a new location.

"Rocks and pipes and problems, that's what my work's about," he said finally. Then, after a bit of a pause, "Truth to tell, Donno, I'm fed up as fuck, but I don't know what else to do." He lobbed his chip paper into a bin. "I'm stuck, see. They pay me too much to look at a lot of other jobs, but I don't get enough to walk off without any worries. I hate the dust, the shitty places, and the moving around every five minutes. I don't really live anywhere, and it gets on my tits." Face drawn into a mocking grimace, he said, loud and low, "Oh, if only Siân Jenkins had said yes, we could be tucked up together now in Sketty, with our Asda uniforms on the back of the door, in awful wedded bliss."

He got up and smacked the salt off his jeans and hands. "What about you Donno? You gonna keep on with the driving? Last time we saw each other you said you were saving, getting a pile of dosh together. You must have a huge pile saved up by now eh?"

It took me by surprise. I knew we'd talk about me and what I was doing, eventually, but I wasn't expecting it like that.

"Well, you know, as soon as you get it, it goes... too many nights out, that's the problem."

"But you're not gonna do this forever are you?"

"Well, not sure to be honest. I don't know really. I just need to work out what's going on and what I want to do... Then I'll make a move. Bit like you really..."

"Yeah... I guess so. Yeah, we're both a bit stuck aren't we Donno?"

The wind howled around the shelter, and Mikey hauled himself up.

"Come on matey, let's get out of here before we freeze to bloody death. You got any clout with the taxi boys down here? Can we skip the queue?

And I wandered along behind this great bear of a man, saying something about knowing the lads 'cos I lived down here, but not working with them, town and Mumbles being different. . . But Mickey was on ahead, not hearing, and there wasn't a queue anyway, so we both got straight in a cab on Mumbles square. The cold had driven everyone into clubs or off home.

Mickey told the 'drive to go up to mine first, then on to his folks' house. We both seemed very sober now, sitting in the rattling cab, blinking out at the empty streets. When we got to mine I made a half hearted offer of a drink, but Mikey just said

"What you doing Tuesday? You're on earlies aren't you all next week? Give me a bell," and he fumbled a card out of his wallet, while I hauled myself out of the car. "Tuesday. Ring now, won't you?" and he pulled the door shut, waving and grinning through the salty window.

I let myself into the flat, freezing cold and, for some reason, utterly bloody miserable. Seeing Mikey, our conversation in the Founders, that had all stirred things around a bit. Then, down there by Bondy's just being put on the spot, and having to talk about what I was doing and why, that had taken the guts out of me somehow. As I wandered around the flat and went into the kitchen to open a bottle of wine, I said out loud

"What the fuck are you doing Don?" And I couldn't answer.

I really didn't know what I was doing, or why I was still there, driving that fucking cab around this fucking town. For the first time in years, I felt like crying.

Alan

When I woke up in the morning, the telly was still on in the living room, all the wine was gone from a bottle on the floor, and I was lying fully dressed on the bed. I felt like shit.

It wasn't a start I was accustomed to, but it happened, just now and again. Before I moved, I went through the quick Oh Fuck What's Happened mental checklist:

Work? Not today, off.

Got to be anywhere else? Too difficult to remember, but it can wait.

Anyone else here? Couldn't see any evidence.

Wallet? Back pocket, empty, but no surprise in that.

Damage? No sore bits, no torn clothes, no blood on knuckles or bed.

Okay, then, relax, try not to move, and let the details come back in their own time.

And it was as I let my head go gently back on the pillow that I felt all the sadness again. I had a big wash of frustration and sadness that made my cheeks flush hot. Circling my mind was the sense that somehow I'd touched

base with a better, more mobile bit of my life, a bit of me from times when everything seemed possible, when stuff hadn't become stuck. I thought about what I could've done with the years, what I might be doing, if I wasn't - well, here. I thought about Lynne and I thought about Mam, and it all got mixed up and blurry. I was in too much pain to sort things out there and then, so I thought I'd go up and see Gramps, maybe chat about things.

He never really talked, did gramps, far less chat, but I found that he helped me talk. Dad had gone before I was ten, and ten years later the lung cancer that had been dragging her by inches towards the grave through forty-five years of hard smoking finally took off Mam. I didn't have anyone that I talked to about stuff, and hadn't ever been good at the talk anyway, I guess because Dad had died when I was so little, and Mam was always too busy trying to make a living to stand and talk.

After Alan's death six years ago, and Mam's the year after, Gramps knew grief. To have your two youngest children die before you wasn't unknown up in the mining communities of the valleys some years back, where poor health and danger were a part of the social fabric that bound people's lives. But, in modern Swansea, despite the worst ravages of Thatcher's years, it was hard and unlucky to have lost out so badly against life. And, Gramps was a good philosopher in some homespun way, always able to grunt agreement or growl no, no, at the telling moment. He had a way to see through shit and out the other side. He just never applied it to himself. So, I'd go and have a chat.

The order of priorities emerged. Turn off that bastard telly, sort out the headache, down a raw egg - with perhaps a little sharpener in it, walk down the

village, get the car, and go up to Gramps this afternoon. That was the plan, then.

As I reached the Founders and fished the keys out of my pocket and went to cross the road, I had to do a double take. Right next to my old thing was a dark green Saab, the old hump-backed sort like uncle Alan used to have when I was a boy, same colour, same model, everything. Perfect nick, though it must've been nearly thirty-five years old. Restored, I'd guess. You just don't see them nowadays, and it thumped me right in my childhood.

Always drove Saabs did Alan. Not the new, flashy, low-slung ones built for blokes in sharp suits, but this old hump-backed, Swedish forest-road type. He'd had a white one way back when they were two-stroke, then had a green one, liked it and had had three more after that. All three, the same spec, same colour, from the same garage; bet he even managed to get the same price on them. Safe, predictable, reliable, solid; Alan was in his element; each successive car brought him a sense of peace, a reminder that there was sense in the world, and that someone somewhere was making big, metal, packets of order, carefully engineered, year in, year out. He had a respectful affair with every car, tending to its needs and warming to each of the green beauties in turn, as they brought all the qualities he loved, making his life solid, economical, and comparatively rust free.

Alan liked the fact they'd have a steady grip on the road doing fifty-five on a bit of a downhill, with a good following wind. That was about as much as

he ever pushed a car. He never went over fifty-five, and never needed to. Always in plenty of time, Alan, always allowing for eventualities. Never was late, never was in a rush, and never cursing a red light or a learner in front. So the cars had a low-rev life.

But I caught him once, watching telly, when one of those early rally programmes came on. In those days the big names were all Swedes and Finns, unpronounceable and uncommunicative, but boy, could they drive. Back then there were no flash sponsors, no big money corporate tents at every pit stop and stage, just dark forest scenes, four big, yellowish spots coming out of the rain, tyres rasping on forest gravel, curtains of kicked-up grit, and torches on camping tables at the finish line. Well, I hung on at the door of the room, watching him watching them. Alan, he was gripped, transfixed, and I thought this is it, I've got him. This was his secret life under the car coats and driving gloves, this was Alan's porn mag in the back of the wardrobe. But, as it went on he just sat there, not excited, but looking sadder, shaking his head now and then. Eventually, he said, soft, tender,

"Don't boys, don't do that to them, it's not doing them good."

I was more embarrassed than if I had found him with his hands in his trousers. I tiptoed away from the door and left him with his grief.

Al had been going up Townhill in his Saab number four, to see the old man one Sunday morning half a dozen years ago. It was only ever on a Sunday that he saw Gramps. Duty call, regular. Take the kids swimming in the morning – pool in winter, down the beach in the summer, drop them off, damp and tired, at the house so Jen would have an easier time while she did the cleaning

then the roast and veg. Click the lid off a bottle of bitter, drain it in three long swallows while Jen sorted the kids' costumes and towels for the wash, then say tata, hop in the car again and up to sit with the old fella and go through the *Express* for an hour or so.

The road up the hill was great. It was a pleasure to drive that road up to Gramps. Smooth, wide, and trees on both verges, so in autumn when the sun came at it low from behind, it was like an orange torch beam showing you the way. They've put in a speed camera now to try to stop the kids flying down at seventy, because of the big bend at the bottom. Trouble is, though, they hadn't clocked the fact that the kids were all in stolen Astras, and didn't give a fuck about tickets. Or cops. Or themselves. Or the rest of us.

So Jen was doing all the work, as always, and Alan was off up the hill to read the small ads for an hour while the old man talked at him, or sat silent more often. Not exactly lazy, Alan, he got things done, but he got things done slowly, which usually meant someone else did all the things before he got around to them. No, he was too decent, too well meaning to be lazy; no side to him and no plan, but he wasn't, well, quick. Anyway, no one in the family would ever have dared say he was slow or lazy for years because Mam wouldn't have a word said against her big brother.

Mam always had it that Alan was a hero, chiefly on account of a story she never got tired of telling about him. It was usually rolled out when the family were together, Christmas and the like, especially if there was any talk about crime, youth, the war, drink, or the way the town had gone off. Which was pretty much all that Mam and Gramps ever did talk about. Alan never took

part, but stayed close, evidentiary, swelled during the tale and spoke with a louder voice for a while after every telling. Christmases and Easters, flushed with third-party triumph, Alan almost reached shouting point a few times.

It had been during the war, when Alan was in the Royal Navy. On leave at the end of '41, he'd met Des in town one freezing December day for a couple of pints. Des had been in subs, but got invalided out early on, with a hernia. The boys sank some brotherly beers, warming each other with tales of home and Atlantic fronts, then, as night drew in, they battened down the hatches and started the long walk up to Gramps and Nan's. About half way back, Mum's story has eight men, eight 'great roughs' surrounding the boys, up for a fight and in to give them a damn good leathering. Now, with Des's hernia, there was only Alan to hold the ground. So, frost or no, Alan faced the gang, dropped his coat, stood there bristling in his blues and said

"Listen now: there's only one of me and eight of you, but the first one'll get a bloody hiding. Who's it going to be, boys?"

And, the story has it that they couldn't decide, went all sheepish, respectful, cowed.

"No bother like ...just a joke ...no harm done ...sorry lads ...didn't realise you were serving, thought you was conchies...too cold for mucking' about now... 'Night boys..."

And uncle Al's place in family legend was fixed and after that, perhaps he didn't need to rush or work hard. It was Mum's favourite story, and it had gone on strong, for nearly fifty years, compound interest accruing, index linked.

So Alan always went up the hill Sundays; sedate, stately, warm from the swim and breathing hops all over the metal dash as he la la'd his way through town. Always sang at the wheel, Alan! – the car was too old to have a radio, so the experience was a mixture of sheer driving pleasure and rehearsal. On Wednesdays and Saturday mornings, he was in a choir. Well, not any choir, but *the* bloody choir, the Orpheus. They'd had records out, and, one Christmas, they'd been on telly with Harry Secombe. But Alan was untouched by all the stardom, kept his feet on the ground.

He'd probably just gotten through *Myfanwy*, and was just getting to *Men of Harlech*, a good bit of hwyl and third gear for the hill, when the van came at him over the white line.

In the papers they said Alan's bumpers ended up touching round the back of the tree, and the van was two feet shorter up than normal, against the wall. There were four boys in the van: two dead, one in a wheelchair and one with plates in his legs. It took the fire crew an hour and a half to cut uncle Alan's body out of the Saab. All Jen got back were his keys, with blood on, and the rug he kept in the boot. It was about ten, maybe twelve months after that they put the speed camera up there.

I shuddered a bit, with the cold and the memory, stepped across the road and, as I went by, just let the back of my hand rest for a second on the chilled front wing of the Saab. Sleep tight Alan.

Up on the Hill

Orange rectangles spread across the room, heavily specked by the rain chasing around the windowpanes. Where they met the vague glow from coals in the blackened grate the shafts of street-light seemed to suck the heat off the fire, projecting the outside chill right into the room. Beyond the rimed windows, the light was fading as drizzly day gave way to another squally November night. The streetlamps had come on early today, but not early enough to catch the dusk napping. On days like these it was dusk when you finished breakfast.

His house stood in the middle of a curving street of terraced and semi detached houses, each bearing the stamp of ill-maintained inter-war council property. The street sat like a crowning band around the edge of the stout and brooding hill which sat above and behind the town. Too steep for housing development, the flanks of the hill were wild with trees and ivies, but there, just before the flattened top of the mound sat three rising streets, concentric circles on the crest of the hill, each looking out over the wilderness, the town centre, the docks and the sweeping curve of the bay. Yellowing roughcast frontages carried on their tired stand against the coastal weather, each having seen nearly seventy years of gale-driven sleet and rain, relieved only by weak Welsh sunshine through summers that seemed shorter every year. Slates, some split, some slithered into diagonals, or poking angular out over guttering, carried sheets of salt-tainted rainwater down to pipes heavy with a dozen coats of blistered black paintwork. The down pipes and drains sputtered and gagged,

taking down another brackish load to sluice away the last, rotting, autumn leaves.

On this evening, out beyond the sodden garden and running street, beyond the plunging bank above the buttoned-up town, the sea was still and leaden, a faint mist on its hissing surface. A rusted dredger chugged for safety into the one working dock, soaking sand and gravel settling heavy in its hold. From above, the vessel looked sleepy, ponderous, its deck lights yellowy in the rain, tiny figures grub-like around the green decks.

Time was, when anyone looking out from the street would have had a dozen or more ships to see, ships of size and speed, ships from all edges of the wide horizon, bringing or taking the stuff of life from this bustling town. But now, the town had barely two ships a week and the docks were being filled in one by one, cargo sheds turned into flats and rail yards making way for garden centres.

On sagging sofas in the back offices at AberCabs, Glamtax or AA cars, drivers like me now had their final quiet minutes before the evening rush. As the shoppers had cleared, they'd headed back to the office, with time perhaps for three heavily smoked fags, a cup of lukewarm Maxpax, before they head off into the slanting rain for office pickups. Mondeos clip along the dock roads, veiled in spray, tappets rattling and tired shocks thumping with each uneven concrete joint.

He couldn't see all this – didn't need to, he had the whole town and its movements in his mind, as if the windows caught and condensed the life below

for him. His observations, though built as much on history as the present, were pretty good, had a hard accurate spine and held fast despite the years. What he saw in his mind's eye was as clear to him, and as true as if his face was pressed to the salt-stained windows from dawn till dusk. He knew what went on outside his house, in the street, on the estate, in the whole sprawling town.

His house was among the first built, on the first street set out back in 1923. He and Beatty had moved in on December 1st 1923, and, through the general Strike, the depression, the war, rationing and austerity, the boom and slow death of docks and mines, the estate had grown and aged around them.

In '23, before the mud and heaps of bricks had taken shape, before the gangs of men moved on to the next straggling plot, the next street, when Charlie and Beatty arrived, all they found around them was a forest of stubby pine pegs, marking out the other plots, dividing walls, street-corners and drains. But, so quickly, the dots and lines on the foreman's maps grew into places, places he knew, places where families put down their lives. Cold, bare-brick shells still smelling of wet cement were soon given numbers, curtains appeared in windows, rubble went and gardens grew, and the sense of a neighbourhood crept across the hill.

Once a few well-planned streets of model dwellings, the place now had the dimensions and population of a true urban estate, with all the stinking ills, the yobs, slobs, junkies, abusers, pimps and tarts attendant on such a place. And Charlie knew them all, by the hundred, over the years and generations, long before he ever became our Gramps. But he hardly left his chair now. He'd stopped going out among them now, out into the neighbourhood or down the

long flights of steps into the town. He never walked to the end of the road and got the bus down, and hadn't ever in his life called a cab anywhere. He just travelled in his slowing mind, while he waited, for whatever would come.

On the right-hand arm were perched the ashtray, fags and matches, the other was dark and brittle from the spills of countless cups of strong, sweet tea. Twenty years ago, he'd have cursed the mess and rushed for a cloth to wipe the paid-for-on-the-nail, pride-of-place furniture, but now the effort was too much. For a quarter of a century, he'd resisted the tightening fingers of rheumatism that got in his joints, a resistance born of sheer, bloody, will. No vitamins, no diets, and always a muttering rejection of doctor's prescriptions. In later years, after Beatty'd gone, and things slowed down, neighbourly gifts of fish, fruit and veg and the family's nagging him out for a ride round Gower or a trip to a quiet pub, followed by the slow, wheezy shambles on the prom had stretched his health out, given him a contact with the town and its ways. But now his pins didn't work so well, his wrists were knotted and his elbows cracked at the weight of the kettle he set to simmer every morning. We still nagged, but he didn't come out, and all the neighbours that knew him were long gone.

When we did call, it was always the same routine at Gramps', had been for twenty years, whether it was uncle Alan, my old man, or now me, doing the duty calls. It had been handed down, like some old tradition for dealing with the royal family, full of observances and pointless rituals that no-one remembered starting. Pull up outside, give a tough look to the kids playing ball on the grass opposite, wrestle the gate open, then up the steps and stand there by the door, back to the town and the whole huge bay.

The door was green, a ludicrous bright emerald green of leprechauns and four-leaf clovers, of butter ads and pantomime merrie men. Full of runs and bubbles, the paint seemed to move about, seethe with life as if it held the last bits of energy seeping out of the house. It was paint full of runs and bubbles because cousin Will hadn't bothered to put the undercoat on properly. And the paint was the same colour as the lamp-posts in the road. Exactly the same. Nan could never get over the trouble it must've taken Will to find that match, but then he was such a good boy, a credit to uncle Alan. But it was a shame the paint was faulty and bubbled like that. Always Nan's favourite, Will didn't bother to do anything right, because he never needed to, it was always taken as read that he'd done his best, the best, and that'd be better than the rest of us. Bastard.

So, knock-knock, knock-knock, go the few neighbours left that bothered, knock-knock, knock-knock goes uncle Alan, goes Dad, goes me, now, on that daft bubbled-up door. Waiting an age. Knock, knock, knock, again, and wait.

So why did we all, all of us, sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren – 'them nippers' as he called us though there wasn't one of us under thirty now – always wait, knocking? We had to knock because there was no bell to ring, it hadn't worked since Alan and Will had fitted it years ago. Even Will couldn't fix it – not his fault, mind, he had to contend with the cheap wires, the swollen wood, the faulty screws Alan had bought, the seagulls, the damp, the cold, the sunshine, the ozone layer, the radiation, the usual old bollocks. So we knocked. Every one of us knew he was in there, and knew he

wouldn't move. We knew he was there by the fire, rain or shine, and he knew we were out there on the bloody doorstep rain or shine, but still he wouldn't move. He never got out of his chair during daylight unless his cup, plate and baccy box were empty at the same time. So, knock, knock, knock and wait. Then, eventually, after the observance had been done, the ritual satisfied, we'd turn the handle and go on in:

"Ullo, Gramps, its only me..."

It was always the same sight. On the floor, a dark red, rag rug that Nan had made during the blackout. Around the edges the floor was brick, and painted black. Vinyl sofa, chair and stool, shiny, old, with springs and stuffing barely held in check. In the far corner, a bed, the one that Nan had lived in after strokes had taken her movement and speech. She'd been a hazy figure to me, just a pink nylon housecoat, a hairy chin and a pair of cool, marbled hands on the eiderdown. I was six when she eventually 'went', but even when she was ill, she'd been the other half of life here, the thing for which Gramps bothered, for which he slept and woke. He slept on her bed now, as if the upstairs wasn't there, but no-one ever talked about that, and the bed was invisible, by agreement, to all who came in the room. By the bed, a huge brooding sideboard, with big oak shelves above, on which there balanced a great wooden radio cabinet with cloth down the front. No telly, never had one. But the centrepiece was always Gramps, sat there by a roaring fire.

The town and bay would shimmer and swelter on August days, or melt into a wash of grey and blue as the wind threw rain against the panes through the wet Welsh winter, but always he was there in front of that blazing fire. In a woollen three-piece suit, with a watch chain and polished shoes, with his mind on the town and his eyes on the seething red mass by his side, Gramps sat there, from the time the sun crawled up over the hill, till it fell off the edge of the bay.

It used to fascinate me as a boy, that big pile of burning coal, with all the old-fashioned paraphernalia spread across the hearth. There was a big tin tub always full of spills, the factory-made straw ones for years, then tightly-rolled and tied-off pieces of newspaper more recently. Never saw him make those, they just appeared in the tub – but then again, he never let the fire out, so he wouldn't have been kept busy with the job. Beside the spills sat the steel poker, brass shovel, and brush. The poker often got buried deep in the roaring mound, to stir drive the temperature up another fifty degrees, but the brush and shovel never moved off that stand.

The fire was too intense to allow any dirt or dust to settle on the polished hearth; all was sucked into the flames then sucked up that guzzling chimney. Hair, paper, fag-ash, crumbs, dust, you only had to let something go within a foot of the fire and it was swept in, whoosh, a second's flaring light, then blackened flakes shoot up the chimney. And the hod always stood, heavy and dark, just to one side of the hearth, ready to feed the roaring anthracite stack. When I was small, I used to stand by that hod and take in the cool, earthy dampness of the resting coal as a relief from the roaring fire.

One winter, when I was about ten or eleven, he got me to fill that hod for the first time. I went through the chilled kitchen and out the door to the back. The kitchen was always cold and smelled of cat food, though Tibbs had died a decade ago. It never had in my recollection that baked-in, cosy, ironed-clothes warmth of a room once filled with mums and dads and kids in loving, tumbling chaos. Somehow, over two or three lingering decades, the house had lost its memory of a family. The warmth that came from people together, from the energy of children growing, from the power of people making their lives, had just drained away. The warmth and noise of lives had seeped out of the fabric of the place, as heat from the fire escaped around the yards of greying draught excluder that wreathed the doors and windows; in its place was left the residue: a thick, cool, greying silence. Now it seemed that there had only ever been the single unlit gas ring, the deep angular sink, rough from Vim and yellow with disuse.

The lino on the kitchen floor was stiff with age and cold, its colour gone, the vivid patterns reduced to reddish daubs on a slate grey base. Rough horsehair backing had worked its way through at the joints and by the cracks around the sink and larder door, like weeds through a pavement. On a shelf by the larder were the breadboard, the knife, and always half a batch loaf. Never saw a whole one, and never saw the room without one, but when the thing arrived, and when he ate the stuff was as much a mystery to me then as when he shaved or washed or lit the fire. These small domestic tasks just seemed to

happen when no-one was around, and though on some days the shaving didn't happen at all, the rest of him was presentable whenever anybody called, which now was less and less often.

That day, as I clung to the still-warm copper hod and took the few steps to the coal shed, the wind took the breath from me, but as I heaved the door and stepped into the dark, all was calm; it was still cold, but the air was richer, thick with blackness and a vegetable dampness from way beneath the ground. Here was something very settled, unnervingly still and deep. To go back with that hod, now cold and heavy, was like shifting worlds, becoming exposed to light and heat for the first time.

If his bladder was full he'd make a quick trip, but if it was just the ashtray or his throat, the fire would do. Fag ends lasted a blazing second, writhing in the orange mass before they vanished, but his gob lasted longer. He'd always had a cough that made strangers stare, that would make you wonder if the rolling, lung-tearing sound would ever end and he'd breathe again. He always did, but when I was little, and when he got older it sometimes seemed an even call. He'd end up with a lump of stuff that he'd spit, without moving, without leaning forward, neat and clean, straight into the centre of the fire. The whole mass would hiss and sket, the flames would jump and fuss around the sizzling centre, and a load of blue flames would pick up the gob. Didn't last long, but it was quite a trick.

So, all of us knew all of this, every detail of the inside, just as he knew what was happening on the outside. We knew that he'd be there, not really waiting, but expecting, knowing, as we knock-knocked for ages. Then, as always, whoever it was would turn the handle, push against the draught excluder, and into the parched, lung-grabbing air. And that was how it was the day I found him.

The small couple

Mr and Mrs Griffiths were small, sad people, tired and quiet, both short and grey, stooped at the shoulders, she a little taller than him. I only ever saw her wearing a long Mac, buttoned to the neck, clutching a matching bag of some vague, beigey colour. He wore an exhausted brown suit with gaping pockets and greasy elbows, a green jumper with a white shirt underneath. With black shoes. But despite the sadness that came off them like a faint musty smell, there was always music in their soft voices. In their manner now and again, in their soft retorts to certain remarks, there was a hint of distant impishness, in the way that some old people have in Wales. And, way back in the dark of Mr Griffiths' eyes there was something very dim, but still sparkling, just a little.

I collected them first time from town, outside Meath's department store I think, and took them out to the caravan park at Caeravon, about three miles out the back of town, along the north Gower coast road with Loughor and Llanelli beyond. It's quite a big park, for what the Griffiths' said were 'statics', those long caravans with picture windows at one end, that never went anywhere and had trellis around the bottom of them like a skirt. They were all laid out in rows, each with a different colour trellis, usually to match the stripe of colour inlaid down the side of the van. Little concrete roads ran in short straight lines around the site, like someone had laid the place out on an Etchasketch. There were heavy, black, cast-iron coach lamps swinging from stout wooden poles at each junction, and white paint along the kerbways.

Penned between the roads, neat squares of cropped grass held each van. Some plots were empty, waiting for new vans and fresh trellis, and thin pale green shoots were just beginning to take hold again on the rectangles of bare earth.

Caeravon sits right under the back western edge of Townhill, looking out along the shoulder of Gower, and in the distance, towards Lanelli, Bury Port and Laugharne. So, the view is very different to the one from town; no bay, no view to Devon in fine weather, no docks and no Mumbles head to peer at. Instead, a quieter, more private view into the estuary at the back of Gower. From the site you could see over the salt flats in the estuary of the river Loughor, across the chequered fields past Bury Port, and, on a good day, pretty much all the way to huge sands and gentle dunes of Pendine. The back of the town, and the view from there down to the west was something that trippers and tourists didn't usually see, but it had beauty. It was different here, gave a different angle, had different smells, carried the air of marshes and mudflats and fields, wading birds and cows, not docks or crashing breakers, cliffs and gulls. It looked away-from, rather than engaging-with the city, was cut off from the centre and its shore by the looming bulk of Townhill as it dropped down to form the spine of Gower. Not quite built-up Swansea, not quite Gower-country, Caeravon always seemed to me a place for the indecisive.

I know it was home for the Griffiths, and all these other people, but the place was ever so sad. Even as soon as I nosed in through the log-effect concrete gates and bumped over the galvanised cattle grid, I could feel it. It just felt like a place of disappointment where people lived out the part of their lives that they'd been left with after the divorce or bereavement or bankruptcy

or retirement or whatever else had stripped them of power and worth and washed them into this state of temporary permanence.

That first time I picked them up, I'd pulled the car up at the kerb right outside Meaths and started to get out, looking out for the fare, who I thought might have a big parcel or bags of shopping. I'm always a bit wary of jumping out in the Princess Way, as there's a smart-aleck warden works Saturdays who'll have a ticket on your screen if you leave the car for more than twenty seconds. Either that or some bastard will have the thing away if you jump out too eager-like and leave it with the keys in. So, I kind of perched, one foot on the kerb, the other in the car, like I was going to scoot it down the road. I hung onto the door, looking up and down the pavement, over at the doorway of the shop, trying to see someone who looked like a fare.

Normally people are there ready on the edge of the kerb, scanning the traffic, ready to make eye contact, anxious that you don't miss them. But these two were in the background, really hard to spot at first. They didn't stand out at all, but seemed to blend in amongst the mass of people coming down the pavement, who seemed to be walking through, rather than around them. Then, as if he'd just woken to the fact that he was waiting for something, Mr Griffiths suddenly switched on, pointed at me, and led Mrs Griffiths forward towards me.

"Oh, hullo, Boy," he said, touching my arm lightly. "Here we are."

You get called all sorts things, some friendly, some formal, some kindly, some plain rude, but it's not really important. 'Drive' was pretty much the most

common, but 'Boy' and, less often; 'Boyo', I had a lot. Often, if they were regulars or I was taking them on a long run, they'd ask my name and it'd be Don. But 'Boy' was okay now, as I held the door and they climbed in the back and got settled in a very deliberate way, as if they were about to watch an evening's telly.

On the journey, they began to tell me that they were only in town because Mrs Griffiths had bought some material for a dress the previous week and it was marked, so they had to take it back, and she was nervous on her own, so Mr Griffiths had gone too, but the lady in Haberdashery had been fine because it was part of a faulty batch so lots of people had been back too, and they could've swapped, but she couldn't see anything else she liked, so they had the credit note instead. And they felt well treated, and were happy, but now they were tired and anxious about being out for so long.

I picked them up many times after that. I think they kept using us because they trusted me, felt relaxed and felt I was familiar. They'd ring up, and ask for me – not for a car, but for me to come and get them, like I was their son or something. Sheena and Avril got to know them pretty quick, they're good like that, and usually sorted them out okay. They might have to wait a bit, or even put off the trip till next day if I was off, but they didn't mind

"As long as we get our Don, that's fine love. We don't mind a bit of a wait, No hurry for us, love. You just put us on his list for later, love." Mr Griffiths would tell the girls.

Once though, I was off or up at the airport in Cardiff or something, and they had to have Bryn. He said it took him five minutes to talk them into the car. When I saw them next time they talked about the shock it gave them and the way it had unsettled Mrs Griffiths, all the way into town and back.

Nearly a year after I'd first picked them up outside Meaths, one fine week in October, Mr Griffiths died. She called the office, Mrs Griffiths, and left them her number, would I ring back, very urgent, all very serious. I knew something would be wrong, so as soon as I'd dropped my fare I pulled over and called.

Well, he was dead, and she wanted me to know and thought I should be told, and thought he'd want that. I didn't know what to say, just sat there in the car, phone in my hand, gaping.

"It was last Monday afternoon, Don, and he just went," she said, as if he'd nipped down to the shop.

"Last Monday, while he was having a lie-down in the afternoon... Just went," she repeated as if I hadn't grasped it all.

She was very quiet, not obviously tearful. I did my best to say the right thing, which is nearly always the wrong thing or something stupid or awkward, at that kind of moment. But then, it does no harm, because the person you're saying it to is the other side of a big, thick, foggy glass, and they don't know what you're saying anyway. As long as something's said, the abyssal silence bridged, it's enough.

So, with a bit of arm-twisting with a couple of the boys, I got the following Friday afternoon off, and drove up to the crematorium. I'd been there

to Mam and Dad's funerals, and I'd taken people there loads of times since, but the place never failed to put a shiver down my back. The grounds are lovely, all closely tended borders and shrubs, lush green lawns with stones of remembrance laid in neat little rows; if it didn't seem creepy it'd be a nice place to walk around on a sunny day. But it was creepy.

Now, despite it being surrounded by those tranquil gardens, and being a place of eternal rest, the crem itself is actually like an airport. No screaming jet engines and crowds of ever-so-slightly nervous tourists, but a subtle, hushed airport where only one person gets waved off, and all the crowds are sleepwalking through the moments. The big black cars sweep in one side, out wander the fuddled families and friends, through the chapel with the music and the eerie conveyor belt that takes the polished box silently away. There's faltering singing and choked speeches, then out the other side for some awkward handshakes, hugs and pats, then off out the exit, as the next lot sweep through the entrance.

So, there I was, in black tie and only suit, intent on blending in yet being obviously there, being counted. I parked outside the gates and walked down the drive between the neat poplars, a watery sun catching the dew on the grass. The blending in didn't really work. As I walked down to the chapel of rest, I thought I'd got the wrong time or day. Nobody. Not a single soul. The hearse was parked there, and one mourners' car, but apart from the undertakers leaning on the big black bonnet of the hearse, it was deserted. I knew some of Aldreds' drivers, as they did weddings as well as funerals, so I wandered over and asked Kevin what was up.

"Hullo Don. Picking up, or dropping off?" He started to chuckle, then he saw my tie, and the smile died.

"Ah, sorry Donno. No disrespect like. Are you here for Mr Griffiths?"
So I explained and he shook his head, slow and sad.

"Well, yes, it's him, just gone in. And, there's only her that came with us. I think there were a couple more here when we arrived, but only a couple. She's not even having the car back, making her own way."
He kicked at a stone on the tarmac and then looked me in the face

"A bit sad, like, to be honest, isn't it? You know, to end up like this..."

Which was as close to an admission of tragedy as you'll ever get from the driver of a hearse.

All I wanted to do was leave, but I breathed out, lifted my eyebrows to Kev, and wandered slowly into the chapel.

It was cold, grey, and smelt too much of flowers. The light was odd, not bright, yet not shadowy, almost foggy; it reminded me of those early energy saving lamps which were never bright enough no matter what wattage you bought. Well, the council, has to save money too. Must cost enough just to run the furnace.

Of course the door creaked as it opened and as it closed, and all five people in there swung around and looked at me. Three men at the back, in grey overcoats, looked like coppers. Then Mrs Griffiths and another small, worried looking woman at her side. Waving me down towards her, Mrs Griffiths made a big fuss of moving along the pew, like the place was packed, just managing to squeeze me in. The other lady muttered and shuffled, and I arrived next to them.

She nodded long and respectfully at the front of the chapel, then half turned to her left, towards the other lady, a carbon print of herself.

"Don, love, this is Mr Griffiths' sister in law," like the entire world needed to be translated and named in its relation to the small coffin that lay on the plinth at the front.

"Megan," the sister said. Just that, no more. Then she turned and stayed looking intently at the coffin for the whole time we were in there.

"She's very upset," Mrs Griffiths mouthed at me. And I don't remember what I mumbled back.

The vicar said some bland but comforting things about a man he'd never heard of till five days ago, and the five mourners mumbled their way through two tuneless Welsh hymns and fingered the cheap cardboard order of service. The coffin slid smoothly behind the curtains. And when it was over, we wandered towards the other door of the chapel, had our hands pumped by the

vicar, and on out into the sunlight. The three men were gone, striding back up the drive against the flow of cars and mourners arriving for the next cremation.

“Well Don, love, he’s gone now,” Mrs Griffiths said.

And the sister said

“We’ll have to move the car, Megan, they need the space now,” and she started walking slowly away from me and Mrs Griffiths, who began to follow her, slowly, mechanically. I followed a pace or two behind, not really sure what else to do.

Mrs Griffiths stopped and turned to me, halfway to the car. She spoke quietly, evenly, in control, but only half there really

“Thank you for coming, love. He would be pleased, I know.”

And, for the briefest time, she put her hand on my sleeve, then she turned and walked the rest of the way to the car her sister had already started. She waved, just once, quickly and shyly from the window, as the old grey Vauxhall revved its way up towards the exit, thin grey smoke oozing from the exhaust.

So, I wandered around the chapel building and over the grass towards my car, keeping well clear of the crowd gathering for the next one.

Three weeks later I got a message from the girls. She'd rung and, no, she didn't need to speak to me, but would they let me know, would they pass on a message? She'd sold the van, and was going to Porth to be with her sister. It's what he would've wanted.

Stroke

The day after I got Mrs Griffiths' message, I was down at the station picking up a couple from Luxembourg who were going to be in town for a couple of weeks. They lived over in Holland; Utrecht, they said; been there for twenty years. And, they did sound like Holland had got under their skin, into their ways, and pushed some of the Luxembourg Frenchness out. We get a lot of Dutch blokes off the boats, the little coasters that go back and fore along the north sea coast, round the Lizard, up to us and over to Ireland too, so I was used to the accent and the manner. They'd both adopted the big belly laugh and the point-in-your face humour of the Dutch, but not the accent, that was still French. So they were a right old mix. Europe on the move.

And, what I liked best about them was the way that they talked as a pair. He'd usually do the opening, a statement, set the scene, but she'd follow up with a question on the same point half a second later. It was a bit of a double act, as if they were trying to gather information, to research you as they talked. So, often, as they got in the car, on the gentle golden-sunny autumn mornings that we had for the whole two weeks they were here, from him it'd be something like:

"Hello Dhoneld, it is a fine day now for us."

Then quick as a flash, with a lean forward from the back, she'd purr:

"Yes, fine, Dhoneld. But, here, do you have such days a lot?"

And they'd both wait, then nod and Hmm Hmm gently at whatever it was I said back. Nothing pushy mind, from either of them, least of all her. She was always soft in her voice, with an interested twinkle in her eye, but always the question. I liked them, and we got on fine, in a sort of three-handed way.

He was writing a book on river sediment. I don't get many in the car who're doing that, so we'd talked about it for a while. He was a professor over in the University of Utrecht, and rivers were his thing. We did a bit of stuff about Holland and how the Dutch were good with the water.

"And they say, Dhoneld, that God made the earth... But the Dutch made Holland!"

"And yes, it is funny. Had you heard that before, Dhoneld?"

And no I hadn't, so we all had a chuckle, and they Hm Hmm'd and leant back, happy.

Part of his research involved taking measurements up the Tawe, checking silt and other stuff in the water - not that there was much other stuff in the water, even after years of cleaning the place up. She'd more or less come along for the ride, though maybe, of course, to make sure the right questions got asked. We'd chatted so much on the way to their hotel and they felt comfortable with me, so they got into the habit of asking for "Dhoneld" every time they wanted to go anywhere.

Outside the Channel Hotel they'd be, most mornings, with a lunch from the hotel in brown paper bags, a big wicker hamper full of his jars, gauges and other scientific gadgets. She always carried a big, yellow canvas bag which held waders and a couple of metres of rope.

"I cannot fall in, splash, like that, and drift away, along the river. So, around a tree and around me, the rope."

"And can you imagine, Dhoneld, what would happen if he had no rope?"

No, no, I couldn't.

In fact, I couldn't imagine him wading around dipping jars in the water at all. So on the second trip, when I was booked to take them up the river and wait while they got their samples, I was so curious that I locked the car, trogged down to the level grass by the side of the river and helped out a bit with the jars and the hamper. By the end of the first week, I even started putting an old pair of wellies in the boot, so I could get down on the shingle banks in the river with them.

We had a fine old time, him filling the jars, me holding the rope and her labelling the samples and sliding in the questions. And they knew a lot about the place too. When I started to tell them all about the smelters up the valley and the way the whole place had just about died from toxic waste, they already knew. And how the river dumped the stuff way out into Swansea bay, how the cockles and the oysters had died and how the whole of south Wales had been stripped clean of resource and greenery by the beginning of the twentieth century. But they didn't know about the canal, and I took them to see that.

There wasn't much of the Swansea valley canal left, just some disconnected stretches around Clydach and beyond, but we took a trip to see one of the old locks, by one of the little hump-backed bridges that spanned the thick brown water. He loved it, even took a few samples. And while he did, I

told them the story that Gramps told me about the farmer and the swimming pig.

It had happened sometime back before the first war, so Gramps reckoned, just after the canals had really fallen quiet, and he'd been there, seen it all. He'd been a nipper, a cheeky little tyke of ten or twelve, a scruffy kid from a bare-arsed, penny-skint family, with no hopes, not much education and bugger-all to do that day, as on most days. Some adventure or other took him down the valley from Clydach where he lived, with a couple of his mates, just idling away a spring day, looking out for a way to earn, or even nick, a few bob.

It was mid-morning, hot for April, and the three were hacking at brambles along the towpath edge when along came Tommy Rees, a farmer they vaguely knew. Tommy was going down the track by the side of the canal in an old cart, pulled by his stumpy little Welsh cob. In the back of the cart, in a little pen rigged up with sticks tied to the side was a pig, dozing on a pile of straw. The boys left off the brambles and fell in beside Tommy as the horse ambled its way down towards town. Tommy, the cob and the pig where on their way to the Wednesday afternoon market, where Tommy was going to get rid of the dozing cargo.

"He won't put on no weight see," Tommy complained to the boys. "No matter what he's fed, the bugger stays as thin as a toast rack. I can't be doing with a thin pig; thin pigs are no good to me. No good at all."

The boys dropped back a little to look in the pen, and sure enough, there he was, a ribbed featherweight, snoozing on the straw.

Well, as Gramps tells it, the next events happened in a blur, all swimming together in one chaotic moment.

Bryan Trinder, the oldest and most mucky minded of the boys gave a snigger and stepped up to the cart side.

"Well if he's eating the food alright, the problem's down the other end. We gotta block up the other end. Then he'll put on some bloody weight."

And, quick as a flash, before Gramps or the others could stop him, he rammed his stick right up the pig's back end.

With a terrible squeal, the pig took off, straight through the side of the pen, showering Tommy, the horse and boys with straw, sticks and pigshit. Off went the little porker, straight past Tommy, down the track, then swerving left and tearing a ragged hole in the hedge between the track and towpath.

Tommy stood up on the board of the bucking cart, heaved on the reins and yelled the cob into submission. Purple in the face, he turned to the boys:

"If he's not back in this cart by the time I've tied up, I'll tan the hide off all of you, you little bastards!"

But Bryan had already bolted, and was disappearing up the track towards Clydach, so it was Gramps and Leslie Gough who had to deal with pig or Tommy.

Gramps, always a quick thinker, and good with words, started on some excuse that had Bryan in the frame and them in the clear. But only a few words were out when he saw that Tommy, staff in hand, had

stopped, staring not at him, but over the hedge at the canal. The pig, without so much as glancing at the watchers, trotted up to the middle of a little humped bridge, skipped onto the parapet and launched itself out over the canal. No grunt, no squeal, just silence then a splash, as brown water closed over the pink missile.

So, keeping low and out of range of Tommy's staff, Gramps and Leslie bolted for the towpath, shedding coats as they ran. All three of them knew that pigs die when they try to swim, because their trotters cut their throat. The more they hack themselves, the more they panic, the wilder the stroke, the greater the damage, till slowly the creature sinks below the bloody water. Gramps wasn't going to be up for owing Tommy a pig, so it had to come out of the water, alive, intact and fast.

"Tie the coats and we'll sling him out," he yelled at Les.

But, before they had a chance to knot two sleeves together, the pig surfaced, gave a grunt and set off down the middle of the canal in a fine forward stroke. No shrieking, no tearing flesh and boiling water, no blood. Just quiet, satisfied grunts and a little V-shaped wake, as the pig made two or three knots towards town.

Unheard of, a swimming pig; never been known in all the Valley.

Tommy, Gramps and Les were thrown a bit by what they saw. Nonetheless, the boys, still with Tommy's staff in mind, kept pace with the pig, coats at the ready, while Tommy brought the cart along behind.

And, slowly, as the procession got nearer Dillwyn Basin, where the canal broadens and some of the coal and ore barges used to moor up in the old days, a crowd built up to marvel at the little swimming pig. On through the Basin, and into the straight before town, the pig steered a middle course, with admirers on both banks now. Little boys and girls, grown men and women, trotted along behind Gramps, and Les and Tommy.

It was like a carnival by the time they reached the big broad pool at Dyfatty Locks. The locks took the canal down in stages into the back of Swansea, and at the height of the canal trade, barges used to moor up there while they queued for the locks. Right next to the big basin area was the Waterman's Arms.

The Waterman's was a big pub and hotel, originally built for the barge folk, but by this time was popular as a Sunday destination for folks strolling up the towpath from Town or down the canal bank from the valley. Outside, on little grassy terraces, Boyd, the landlord had tables, chairs and benches, with barrels and a little lemonade fountain in good weather. He was a well-liked and successful man, Boyd, and his place was always busy. As the pig made little circuits of the pool, the crowd filled up the terraces, some bought beer, and all shouted encouragement.

Gramps tells it so that Boyd came out of the public bar, saw the pig, heard its story and did a quick calculation. In less than ten minutes, Tommy was folding a five pound note into his pocket, and Boyd and his

cellarman were hauling the pig aboard a little skiff to rapturous applause from the now considerable crowd.

And, every weekend from then on, till Gramps went away to war, twice daily the little pig came out of his pen at the back of the pub to paddle up and down in front of the packed terraces.

They liked the story, and he laughed so much he nearly lost a wader in the silt. But, before we'd finished chuckling down by the water, from up on the grass a question floated down, all silky smooth:

"But Dhoneld, did you not know, in fact, the pigs, they swim so well?"

Yes. Yes, I did know. Always had really.

Fallen

I was sorry to say goodbye to the Dutch pair, because we had some good trips and a bit of a laugh, which doesn't always happen in this job. When their two weeks was up they called in and asked for me to have the fare from the hotel up to the station. We were a bit sad, all of us, as I gave them a hand to check their box of samples into the freight office, then said goodbye and they took their bags off towards the platform.

He said "Make time, if you are in the Netherlands, eh? Come see us... before it sinks below the sea!" and, with a huge ham-handed punch on my shoulder, he was off down platform two.

Then, half a second later, quietly and close to my ear, as she slid by me and onto the platform:

"Dhon, you know we mean this, eh?"

Then I went and had a cuppa in the Terminus.

The Terminus sits directly over the road from the station entrance, and has been serving strong brown tea, solid breakfasts and boiled cabbage, meat and gravy lunches for as long as anyone remembers. It's firmly believed by most of the folk who use the place that they built the whole Great Western Railway and the station opposite just to give it customers.

Colin on nights, who's seventy-going-on-a-hundred-and-ten by all reliable estimates, and who was an experienced driver by the mid-fifties, reckons the Terminus was the only thing left standing when a half-ton bomb hit the block in '41.

The story goes that the place was full of fire crews who'd taken to sleeping on benches and the floor of the place after the main fire station was flattened during the first night of bombing. Two dozen dusty, smoke-reeking blokes, flat out after twenty-four hours on shouts in the centre were thrown awake when the sky cracked and the Terminus lurched and heaved.

The windows came in and the doors left their hinges, but when the dust settled there was no other damage; even the urn still worked. As the crews grabbed their helmets and stumbled outside, the street on either side was no more than two long piles of smoking bricks five or six feet high but, between them, coated in dust though otherwise untouched, was the Terminus and the fire engines parked outside.

It still looks like it would've done in '41, largely because nobody's done much to it since. I think they reckoned that if it had survived the bomb, then repainting, putting in double glazed windows or any other cosmetic fussing was a bit of an insult to the place. So, if you look carefully down in the corner of one of the front windows, among the dead flies and dust, you can see a cracked wooden menu board. The yellowy writing is almost faded away, but you can just make out beef-paste sandwiches, afternoon teas and sundries, all in £.s.d. I bet they had cups with saucers, and waitresses in black dresses when that

was on the wall. No burgers and chips back then; no, it was all dainties and fancies, all very Brief Encounter.

The frontage is in the same lovely stone they used for the station, soft, creamy white, and it's got a little turret in the roofline at one end. It's a bit overblown for a greasy-spoon caff, I suppose, but it pleases me. Alongside it now, facing the station and giving the visitors a good impression of the town is a row of cheap sixties shop units, with a pub called the Greyhound at one end and a row of flats up above. The pub's the sort of place that's got all its regulars in by eleven in the morning, has flickering Christmas lights over the windows year round, and recruits its staff from Broadmoor. Plenty of betting, but no real greyhounds in there; nothing light and quick in there except fingers. Bill Hanley went in there once to pick up some silly twat who'd popped over the road to phone for us because he couldn't be arsed to wait in the open, by the rank. By the time Bill got there, the bloke had drunk three pints, bought twelve, and one of his suitcases was missing. Billy reckoned he had to chuck his shoes away next day, because the soles had gone soft. So, either side is a nasty, rain-stained and faded collection of cheap nothingness. But, in the middle, the Terminus looks great.

Bonnie's a local treasure. She's known everyone since they were young, and doesn't really have an age herself, just stature. Not that she's posh or given to airs and graces, she curses and blinds better and more often than most, and is, by her own reckoning "common as cowing muck, love," but she gets respect, and people listen when she talks.

Bonnie's run the place forever, doesn't ever seem to have holidays and nobody's ever seen her outside. I imagine her up above, in that little turret room every evening, scrubbed clean of the chip and bacon fat, dressed in silk and taffeta, pearls on her head and neck, seated at a table groaning with fine food, scarlet-suited servants hovering behind her. She's holding forth in French, Italian, Russian, or Arabic to some dazzling count or foreign diplomat, a role-up wagging at the far end of a foot-long ivory holder...

"I can't do you a teacake, Don. Tina forgot to get them out the freezer and they're like fuckin bricks..."

So just a tea then – served in one of the un-chipped mugs because Bonnie knows me now, and then I went over to one of the benches at the back. It's always difficult to slide along the brown plastic of the bench when it's a damp day, you stick to the surface as you try to shuffle in to the wall, so I sat there on the end, rather than make a sequence of low farting sounds as I manoeuvred.

A few damp pensioners, a tired young woman trying to get a quick cuppa down, with two still strapped in a buggy asleep, and another mountaineering all over the bench, plus Davey over there in the usual corner with his rheumatic dog. A reasonable morning at the Terminus.

I hauled out my book. I'd just started *USA*, and it was grabbing me. I couldn't get that line about getting to the centre of things out of my head. It's what we're all after, isn't it? The middle of things, the place we think everyone'll be. That's what every last one of them is after on Friday and Saturday nights,

searching for the centre of things. All dressed up in their best Primark and Top Man, newly lacquered or gelled, they're off in high spirits to find the centre of things. Confident, bubbling over, free to be someone else after a week on the checkouts or changing tyres on someone else's company car. And they usually end up in *Bloomers* and then the kebab shop with half their wages gone.

But, no reading for me. As soon as I'd cleared a patch in the spilled salt and hardened egg to put the book down, in comes Kev from Aldred's who I'd seen up at the Crem.

Tea and a pasty, and over he comes.

"Kev."

"Arright Donno. How's it, mun?"

"Well, the economy's worrying me and I can't work out whether to cut income tax altogether, or just set a guaranteed minimum wage for drivers. I'm meeting the prime minister later, so we'll settle it then..."

"Funny Bastard."

"No, things are fine, Kev. Quiet this morning, so I told Sheena to log me off for a bit. You arright?"

"Good, mun."

And, for a while, we tended our teas and he washed his pasty in brown sauce. Then,

"Hey, that was a funny one, last time I saw you, up at the Crem, with old Ieuan Griffiths, wasn't it?"

"Sad, Kev, sad. Not sure whether I felt more sorry for him when he was alive, than when he was in his box, to tell the truth. . . And her, God only

knows. She seemed shut off, like she could blank the whole of life out, while he was always nervous, fussing... frightened, like. Must've eaten him away."

"S'why I never worry, Boy. No guilt, no worries, no illness," says Kev through half a pasty, patting his belly. "Six or seven pints a night, and a bit of work when I have to. No stress, no fuss. Sleep like a baby, me. Snore a bit, though," and he grunted piggy-style.

He munched on, and I waited, because there's usually a follow-up with Kev.

"But he was crushed really, was Griffiths."

"What, a work accident or something?"

"No, mun, crushed inside, squashed up. All done in... Didn't you know about him?"

Kev says that a lot; expects that everyone knows everything about everyone else, the way he does. Because he works for Aldred's he gets all the latest on who's going to whose christening, wedding, silver anniversary or funeral. Every frock and suit event in life, they're there in the back of his car, so that Kev gets a cradle to grave, rear-view insight into the loves, lives and passing of Swansea's people.

"He and Megan used to run that pub, you know, the big one, brick front, by the lights in Pontalan. The one that used to have the jazz... The Mountain Dew it was."

And I did remember. It was a huge place, had a public bar that you could play a game of cricket in, with a fair chance of losing the ball over the boundary. The lounge was just as big, but carpeted, posh. It had a lowered

ceiling, bench seats around the walls in tapestry covers, dark wood chairs and tables, and some real log gas fires in stone surrounds. Down at the far end, a quarter of a mile from the bar, there was a little platform stage with some spotlights and mikes for the music they had on the weekends.

In the old days when the pits were still working such a big place was normal, you'd see them all over the valleys in most of the villages. Then, people had money in their pockets, the relief of work done or the buzz of work to go to, and some things to sing about after a gallon of beer. Count all the miners from all the pits in a seven or eight mile radius of the pub and you've got close on two thousand men, and then I suppose with close on two thousand wives and girlfriends at the weekend as well, that's a lot of folk to fill the clubs, pubs and union halls. Must've been a place to see back then, the Dew, hundreds of rich-voiced lads getting rid of the dust nearly every night of the week, then posh on Saturday, all scrubbed up and with their misses for the one night in the lounge.

So, mostly it was the lounge that did the trade since I've really known the place over the past five or six years, with tidy lunches for folk who've stopped off on a run in the car up the valley to look at the bleakness. The public bar always had a few groups of men in it, watching football or horse racing on the telly, but nothing active, no spirit. The music struggled on a while as a bit of a draw even after the end of the pits, but it was too far from Swansea or Neath to draw enough people in the evenings, too far to risk driving back after a few pints, and not many people want to spend an evening watching a jazz band, just sipping tonic water.

It had to close eventually, just another big building surplus to requirements along the valley roads. When Thatcher shut the pits, a lot of people moved away if they could, down to Cardiff, or to Bridgend to look for work in the Japanese factories. Some people stayed, mostly those who didn't have enough redundancy money to move with once debts were paid. After the strike, nearly all the families were still badly in hock to someone or other, and most of them saw the redundancy money disappear pretty fast. They tried their hands at building hoovers, making sofas, cutting foam into shapes, or just dole and jobbing on the quiet. But enough had moved or gone under to tip the balance, the living money had gone, and the towns died really. The Tory bastards who'd closed the place down shoved in a few leisure centres and dropped the rates on a few industrial estates, but where there's no money and no hope, it's hard to sell things. And people don't really get a lift out of sliding down water shutes when they're facing a lifetime on the dole. No butcher's shops, no bakers, no caffs and no clothes shops, except the second hand ones, but on every corner there was a shop that'd cash dole cheques or lend you money at 47% monthly. The two thousand working men and women were long gone.

I drove past the Dew a couple of months ago. The windows had big metal gratings over them, and there were concrete bollards across the car park entrance to stop the travellers setting up there. Where the big pub sign used to hang in the middle of a little flower bed by the edge of the pavement, an estate agent's board had been nailed up, blathering on about 'a unique re-

development opportunity... flexible business premises... extension and modification subject to normal planning consent...' And a bloody miracle.

"Aye, the 'Dew," Kev said. "And old Ieuan and Megan ran it for nearly twelve years, in the good times the place was packed to the gills every night. And, back then Ieuan was a hell of a boy. He knew everyone's name, knew who was who's butt down the pit, who was going with who and who was the leader in every little crowd that came in. He really worked the place, Don, made it hum, see. Behind the bar with Megan and the staff, or out front, he'd be cheering them all up, moving them on to their next pint, starting the singing and telling the jokes. They loved him... But then it went tits up."

And, with a nod at my empty tea mug, he levered himself out from behind the bench and sauntered over to the counter with both our mugs in his hand. Always does that, Kev. Knows when to break a story, when to insert the dramatic pause for tea, a pull on a fag or a bite on the pasty. Or just to buy some time, think up the next bit.

So, three minutes later, after some raucous laughter by the counter with Bonnie, back he comes with a couple of dark brown teas, two heaped in his, none in mine, and we're back in business.

"Yes, it's sad as hell really. He managed to survive through the strike, just about kept the place running, though the villages for ten miles around didn't have a bastard penny between them for twelve months. I suppose Ieuan knew that there'd be work again, one day, so it was just a case of hanging on. But, when the pit went for good, that was the finish of Ieuan and the Dew.

You know, when the pits started to go, Ieuan must've seen the way it would end up. He started worrying, see, fussing about every penny, made the bar staff spend hours after closing looking for the last few pennies to make the tills balance. Only the tenant he was, see, so he still had to pay the brewery, and they wouldn't have dropped their sights because the pits were going. And he loved the horses, so there must've been a good few quid going in that direction every week."

"So what happened, how did it go tits up then? Did it go under eventually or what?"

"No, much more exciting than that!" And then a lengthy quaff of tea to let me ponder just how it could've been more exciting than that.

"Well, Ieuan just got more and more fussy, fell out with all the staff, saying they weren't selling hard enough, had rows with the draymen, saying they were delivering short, rows with the cellarman, saying he was on the fiddle, rows with some of the customers... All that stuff."

"And?"

"Well this goes on for a couple of months, maybe six, and then, one week, across a bank holiday period, he banks nothing. Not a penny from Sunday to Sunday. Still a big place taking in a good few quid a night, even then mind. So, come the second Sunday, all finished up and the staff gone, and Ieuan locks up, as normal. Except that Monday morning, when the cleaners arrive, there's no-one there to unlock for them. No Ieuan, no Megan. And no takings, nothing in the bandits, almost nothing in the cellar. He'd been working

up to it, see, selling off a bottle here, a crate of something there, replacing nothing for weeks..."

Another long swig of tea for effect, and a big guffaw

"And, tell you what, Donno, they say he even took the records out the juke box, the fags out of the machine, and the pork fuckin' scratchings off the wall. The lot, everything, cleaned out and cleared off, see."

I could see it and I couldn't see it. I thought that probably about half was more or less true. But I knew Kev: though he tells them for effect, there's always a core of truth in there, a good seam of anthracite running through the rock. Just a question of hacking away at the stuff you don't believe or that isn't valuable at the time. Always an exaggeration, but never a lie knowingly told with Kev. Something to do with working for a company that runs funeral cars I expect.

"Yes, so everyone's up in arms come Monday afternoon. The staff haven't been paid and haven't got a job, the company's money and booze has gone, and worst of all, the pub's fuckin shut!"

And Kev pats his pocket looking for a fag as he starts to haul himself up off the bench. But, I grab his big fleshy paw and pull him back to the tale.

"Come on Kev, fuck's sake, finish off first. What happened?"

"Well, long and short, Donno, it's obvious mun, they'd done a runner. Sold or taken everything that wasn't nailed down and bugged off. Wanted, they were. Pictures in the local news, reporters doing pieces in the car park of the Dew, brewery spokesman all over the telly, 'Deeply disappointed at this betrayal of trust ... first concern is for their safety...' - all that bollocks. And, in

the town, they just wanted to kill the bastard for leaving them with no pub. Till the news broke about the kitty..."

Another cliff-hanger, then. I knew I couldn't hold him much longer, but I wanted to get all of it. He hauled himself to his feet, fag already in his mouth. Then he leaned over, the cig wagging:

"Well, worst thing was, the silly bastard broke the rules. Doesn't matter if you break the law, like, but woe betide if you break the rules. Up there no-one really minds if you scally a bit out of the brewery, flog the stock and run with the takings... Even if you piss off without paying the wages, they'll forgive, because the company'll pick that up. But, old Ieuan must've been too greedy, or too bloody desperate, and he went too far Don. He took the trip money, the silly twat." And he straightened to let me grasp the full nature of Ieuan's crime, tapped his pockets absently for his lighter, then bent again, to give me the final nugget.

"See, it comes out eventually Don, that he'd taken the trip money. 'Bout four and a half grand apparently. Well, it was Megan's thing really, she started it just after the lads had to go back to the pit in '85, when everyone was on the bones of their arses. After a year on strike pay, nobody had a bloody tanner to their names, and if any of the wives did save anything up, the sharks would get to know and muscle it out of them to cover the interest on their debts. So, old Megan became a sort of bank for them. Used to take 50p or a quid a week from everyone - or whatever they could afford really. Then she'd add in anything left from tips, from darts subs or from loose change, and somehow by

the end of the year there was always just about enough for all the kiddies to go to Butlins in Barry during stop fortnight.

So, as that came out you can imagine how it went down. No four grand, no trip to Butlins for the village kiddies, and that just wasn't on. So, bollocks to the police, old Ieuan's a marked man with his own people."

He was involved now, was Kev, re-living the story. Didn't want to stop any more than I wanted to hear him. He took the fag out of his mouth, portentous.

"Well sure as, they found them, only three weeks later, up in Hollyhead, trying to get on a boat to Ireland. Landlady of a B&B down by the dock where they'd been staying recognised Ieuan off the five o'clock news and called the cops as soon as they'd checked out. Three carloads of coppers piled down the jetty and they caught up with them going up the ramp to the bloody ship, suitcases full of bloody cash!"

Kev straightens up and lets the drama work. I was spellbound – or spellbound as it's possible to be in the Terminus, a place that's a story in itself.

"Well, Swansea Crown Court, big trial, all over the news. He got five years inside with two suspended, and she had two years' probation. Cardiff nick I think he was in, had a rough time, because by then the story'd got right out about the trip money going, and anyone who was anyone inside took it as a badge of honour to take a poke at him. It's a local nick is Cardiff, and seems everyone who was in there had a mate or had a relative who knew someone whose kiddie wasn't having a holiday... so, Ieuan got a belting almost every week."

He pulled a long, sad face and put the fag back in the middle of it.

"And, they came back here when he got out. But, well gyou saw him, never the man he was. Shattered, all the stuffing gone from him, Don."

He squeezed my shoulder, shrugging as he turned away. "Tarra. All the best mun. Tarra Bon."

And he was on his way to his car, fag lit before he'd cleared the door.

Nicely

The dog end of a weekend. Sunday evening. Quiet all over town, and the station is deserted. Outside, some kids hanging around in the car park by the rank, with a bike with no saddle and no grips on the handlebars, probably come off the tip or out of a skip. They were taking turns to run the bike across two parking spaces, then up and off the end of a plank that rested on a box. With a big lump of stone they were marking the length of their jumps on the tarmac.

Not more than eleven, any of them, all in scruffy nylon tracksuits or cheap shapeless jeans and polyester windcheaters from the market. One of the four was smoking, and all of them were swearing like deckhands. A couple of times, there was a row when someone reckoned they'd jumped further than the line showed, and there'd be a lot of shouting. The smallest of the bunch - he was a good ten inches shorter than the others, and very slight, but a real little dynamo. He was arguing with the rest almost every go, and when things got more heated than usual one time, he grabbed one of the bigger lads by the hair and hit him three times, quick sharp rabbit jabs right in the face. I had my hand on the door handle, ready to jump out and stop them if it turned into a proper ruck, but the bigger boy just turned away, bent over and waggled his arse at titch, then scarpered off across the car park chanting something. Titch picked up the big stone that was their marker and lobbed it at the escaping lad, but it missed him by a foot, banging and bouncing across the empty car park and out into the road. The next jump happened with one boy marking distance with his foot, until after a few minutes the big boy came back, with the stone, and

everything carried on as normal. It made me feel like I was looking at one of those films shot in the east end of London during the Edwardian era.

Not many on the first train, down from mid-Wales. A few pensioners, a couple of tourists obviously gone up the line from here to see the beauty of the Sugarloaf or wander around Llandeilo for the day. The two cabs ahead of me scooped them up and away they went safe and sound before the evening set in or the scruffy kids could hassle them.

Way behind, a straggling group of students coming back in twos and threes after weekends in their parents' stone houses in the little towns and villages up the middle. Some play acting, very amateur-dramatic, all loud voices and grand gestures, from a pair of boys at the front – so they'll be from Llandrindod; then a quiet pair keeping pretty much to themselves, but neat and tidy – they'll be from Dolau; and at the back some girls and a boy in wet weather gear – oh, Llanwrtyd and the bog snorkelling community there, without a doubt.

I watched them, moving out into car park and over to the bus stop. As they walked they got bigger, changed their posture and became quicker, sharper, city-tuned. They all assumed a different attitude, shook off the slower mid-Wales ways, the small-town comfortableness and the unguarded quality that folk have in little communities. Here, in the few seconds it took them to exit the station and cross the pavement, they eyed the kids, drew together ever so slightly as a group, and straightened up, presented a preparedness to the

big city in which they've come to study and through which they'll probably escape forever those lovely towns they left behind this afternoon.

Out came the mobiles, arrangements being made for drinks later in the union bar or happy hour and free pool down at the Woodman. Lots of catching up with all that might've happened in the whole, whirling forty-eight hours since they'd left their flats and rooms and set off to go the other way up the line. And a purple bendybus transports them off towards the lager-and-shots night ahead.

The mid-evening Paddington was right on time, but almost empty. No-one going anywhere much this drab evening. The first group to come out were squaddies, I could see that straight away. They always wear clothes that are just about five years out of date – and of course there's the haircut, though it's getting harder to judge on that alone now. The other thing is that they walk differently, which I suppose comes from years of marching, of never putting hands in pockets, and always being ready to be asked where you're going and why. Purposeful, that's what they are, usually.

Four of them came swaggering out, big, shouldering along, two of them carrying cans of beer, all lighting up the second they were off the station concourse. As a group they were threatening, plastering the air with words, wearing them like a guns and flak jackets. It would've been a great journey for whoever sat by that lot all the way down from Paddington.

There was a good bit of pushing and shoving, and a couple of friendly punches swung, then three of them, each with a bag, toddled off over the road

towards the Greyhound. Brave lads. The one that was left would be mine. As the others left, he settled down a bit, seemed to shake himself free of the company he'd been in, a bit like a dog leaving the water. He was pushing a trolley with a big green canvas kitbag balanced on top of a couple of those cheap square, nylon, zip-bags, so he was either coming home for good or his mam was in for a serious kit-clean.

I hopped out to get the boot open, and he hauled the kitbag in quick as a flash. I could see from scribbles on his bag, that he was in the Royal Welsh. Up in Chester they are, so I guess this lot would've come down and onto this train at Cardiff. Tough then, these boys; they've been in all the hot spots across the world for the past ten years. Well, the Greyhound wouldn't be too much of a problem for them after all.

The two cubes were too big for the boot, so he pushed one in through the nearside back door, and I shoved the other in from my side. He got in up front with me, a big lad, probably mid-twenties, long and lean, about six-three. Huge hands, and he didn't know what to do with them while he sat; they kept moving around, rather as if he was washing them and didn't want anyone to notice. As he talked, he kept lifting them, starting to make a gesture, then they'd stall and drop back onto his knees.

He nodded the usual "Arright Drive'," and we were off to an address he gave me up in Penrhyn.

Penrhyn is cowboy country. It's an estate built back in the early sixties, on what used to be common ground north of Cowyn, and it's been steadily declining since the day the last brick was laid. Huge, with hundreds of houses

and miles of little roads and cul-de-sacs, Penrhyn has one pub laughingly named The Garden, and one row of shops right in the middle of the estate. The houses have been tarted up at various times, once, they were pebble-dashed white, then, when the pebble dash started to fail and flake off, they were all cement faced in fetching grey, and now they're painted in the colour that you see on Army tanks and trucks that are heading for deserts. So, boyo should feel at home in that respect.

What might've been some lovely areas of greenery in the middle of the estate are scarred with tracks where lads race mopeds and bikes in the evenings, and there are always a good few mangy looking horses tethered around the place. Where people bought their houses in Thatcher's sell-off, there are odd patches of stone-cladding, some bizarre looking porch extensions and a few that have fences and walls around that would grace a bullion depository. We don't get a lot of calls from up there, and we never, ever pick up from the pub.

The lad was a bit nervy, as his hands had said.

"Aw, great to be home, it is," he said as we chugged up the hill past our depot at Cowyn and into the edges of Penrhyn. And we talked a bit about what a great place Swansea is, how there's nowhere like it, how the people are the thing that makes it.

"See, the other boys, well they're good as gold like, and we've been together for years in tight spots, so I wouldn't have a word said..."

And I nodded. Yes, yes, not a word said against them from me.

"But, they don't really care about Swansea itself. They can't wait to get back whenever we come home on leave. But I love it here."

And then quite a pause, before he said

"And, I'm out now," testing the words as he said them, uneasy, as if afraid I'd say 'don't be soft!' or something.

"Getting married I am – well, if she'll have me..." and he laughed too loud and too much. I think he even coloured a bit. This was all very new to him.

It turned out that she – Nicki, didn't know yet that she was headed for domestic bliss. He was going to surprise her, going to take her out tomorrow, buy her a posh meal at the steakhouse, and tell her he'd bought out, discharged, for her, and now he wanted to settle down.

It was touching. He spoke as if she was in the car, gently. He wasn't talking to me really, but to her. He was rehearsing himself, putting himself into the right character to bring her round, to convince her he was worth it.

And when I asked him what he'd do, he was again nervous, uncertain.

"Well, I've got a trade, see, cos we're the armoured division, so trucks, heavy goods. Got my apprenticeship see, and trucks I can work with."

I dropped him at his mam and dad's in Treboath Road, a little terrace that looked out over the 'green' and faced towards the shops that sat in the valley around which the whole estate centred. He lugged his bags up the steps and piled them on the doorstep, and then came back to the car to pay me off. I didn't generally leave the car and wander far away without locking up if I was

in Penrhyn. Well, he was clearly waiting for me to go before he knocked, so I took the fare and his two quid tip, and wished him luck.

“Aw, thanks, mun!” he said, as if I’d offered him a job.

I didn’t hang around, but cut across past the pub and along by the shops to get out of the estate. The shops were all caged and boarded up, Beirut-style. The Garden had all the curtains pulled shut and was open, as ever. Legendary, is the Garden. There’s a great story that Bryn down at the garage tells, where back in the Seventies, when there were power cuts all the time, the lights went out in the Garden while everyone was watching some big FA Cup game. This was pretty normal stuff at the time, and the landlord and staff lit candles and soon everything was just about functioning again – except after a little while someone noticed that, in the forty-odd seconds of darkness, someone had had the telly away.

I dropped off a fare there once about a year ago, middle of a Saturday afternoon, and in broad daylight in the car park, there was a fella selling toasters, all boxed and new, out of the back of a van; nobody batting an eyelid about it. Mine works great, and I use it almost every day.

Steady Now

One pick-up at the station was an old fella, in his seventies I'd say, though perhaps older, but he held it well. He walked with a slight limp as he came up to the car, wearing an old tweed suit, well-cut, a dark- blue overcoat, carrying a big, brown, leather suitcase. Brogues the colour of the case too; tan really, not brown.

I never thought those suitcases actually existed outside a film – box-square, corners double stitched, and weighty things in themselves, even without the stuff inside. Shiny fittings, bound to be brass, oozing quality, talking not just of travel but of *adventure*. That type of case tells its own story, speaks calmly of things far away, far, far away from anything that the rest of us can afford or even hope to. In the old films you see porters pushing around little pyramids of those cases on trolleys, and the cases have stickers all over them, magical names of mysterious places, always far-off, places only reachable by flying boat, or on the Orient Express, or by luxury liner, Amazon steamer, Nile cruiser. Cases like that have been to places that magically stop being there when just anyone like you and me might be able to get there.

But here he was at High Street Swansea. There was no queue, and he came over to the car quick for a man with a limp, carrying that big, beautiful case without a lean to one side. So, he was strong. Or it was empty. He got to the car and then a strange thing: he paused, just for a second, but I clocked it, because I'd seen a bit of that when I drove chauffeur cars a few years back just after I got home from uni. He'd paused because he'd been used to doors being

opened for him, used to having his bags taken, used to someone standing there, just being there, waiting to see what he wanted. A long time ago, I'd guess; for many years he'd learned to live without it and whatever it all meant, but the signs still showed, like the faintest scar, or the slightest twitch around the eye. His life might've changed, but he hadn't shaken off that second's pause. I'm fairly sparkey and pretty willing, always ready to hop out easy for someone who needs it, all smiles and willing hands, ready with the boot lid up and the door open. But, I started to move then hesitated, felt something, something in his walk, the way he held his head, the way he regained himself and strode forward, that said that he didn't want help, that he'd just been used to it once, but all that was gone now. Trying to master his habit; he was in recovery from a better life.

But, I did jump out anyway, mainly because I wanted to help get the case in the boot and get a good look at it. He smiled; his eyes catching mine very direct, and said something low and soft that I didn't catch as he passed me the case. I get handed umpteen bits of luggage every day, mostly rubbish stuff from people who don't really travel, just the yearly awkward trip to somewhere the language is a mystery and the food's funny. I see the relief on their faces as they get off the train, or come out of the arrivals at Cardiff airport after two weeks away: 'Well, love wasn't that lovely, didn't we have a nice time. But, now we're back home, thank God...' But this man, he was used to travel, at home being away, and his case told part of his story for him.

Straightaway, through the warm leather of the handle, I could feel the balance of the thing. I know, a case is a case, but this was more than a case; it

was a beautiful box of stories. Normal people have normal suitcases, just cheap, hard plastic boxes, handles unforgiving and awkward to heft. Taking this one was like shaking a hand.

When he'd gotten himself into the back, and the beauty was safely stowed on my tartan blanket in the boot, I closed his door, and hopped back in. His eyes were looking straight at me in the mirror by the time I got settled so, yes, he knew about being driven. He was a big man, head just touching the roof, dark angular features, but with a kindness softening the jaw line.

"Good morning," he started, formal, but warm. Rich voice, maybe south American accent, and smile that looked like he meant it in the mirror.

"The Marlborough Hotel, please driver."

The new multi-storey place built on the edge of the Marina area, glittering, tall and straight, very posh. So he's got a good few bob then.

"Okay, shouldn't take more than ten minutes."

And out we went into the morning traffic. A lovely day; buildings and cars all shiny in the early autumn light. He settled himself for a while, then seemed open to chatting, and I reckoned his English would be good, despite the accent, so I piped up:

"In Swansea for the first time, then?"

"Oh, no," he smiled to me in the mirror. "I lived here when I was young, for nearly ten years. My family had a house, in Gower," and then a pause, "but I was away at school for a lot of the time. Later, during my adult life, I have been here many times, for a week, sometimes two or three weeks. Walking,

swimming, enjoying the beaches and the sea..." and he just paused again, so I waited, but there wasn't anything more coming.

"Here for long this time?"

Try not to pry, but show interest; it's a fine balance.

"Well, yes. I will be here for good, when I can find a house. I am looking to settle here, for ever, you see."

He dropped his gaze from the mirror, and began to look in his briefcase. I muttered something about a good place to settle, lovely to come home, while he uh-huh'd, nodding, and we were into the hotel parking bay in minutes. He tipped well, and took a card that I put my name on, so I thought I'd see him and his beautiful suitcase again. I hoped so, because there was something about him I liked, which made me comfortable.

Sheena gave me a pick up at the West Cross shops, to come back into town, so I pulled out from under the gleaming tower of the Marlborough, and down the curving sweep of the bay on the Mumbles road. On the stretch called Oystermouth Road, traffic runs along the front of what were grand Victorian villas, but is now a rambling terrace of more or less shabby bed and breakfasts. Some are still single houses, but some are more extensive, where enterprise has paid off and careful business plans have led to something imperial. These owners are none of your chubby seaside landladies with regular gents who travel. These owners have been canny, put out a little to gain some more, bought up their neighbours, one after the other, knocked through, and kept

going. There are three or four of these places, now calling themselves hotels, each with a couple of dozen rooms and fairly plush non-residents' bars. For their lucky guests sixty-five quid will buy a modern double overlooking the bay, satellite TV and air con, nice china and a breakfast menu that tells you which farm your rashers came from. But for those either side, with peeling paint and grey net curtains the stock in trade is copped-off couples booking in late, sweaty after clubs on Friday and Saturday nights. Giggling and nervous, or full of vodka shots and hormones the lucky couples get a twenty-five pound room, orange swirly carpets, flat-pack furniture, a set of bobbly polyester sheets and a dose of chlamydia all in.

After the couple of miles, I'm through Blackpill, with its little Lido stuck in the nineteen fifties. I used to come here with Mam and dad when I was little, thrilled to bits in a lumbering wooden motorboat going clockwise around a concrete island in two feet of brown water. The air was always thick with shrieks and laughter, cheap sun-oil and blue two-stroke fumes from the boats. Even now, I half expect to hear one of those tannoys as I go by, announcing the start of the bathing beauty or bonny baby competition.

On past Lilliput, this has never had a Gulliver to my knowledge, and into West Cross, with the Hotel on the sea side of the road, a row of shops and well-loved chippy behind the green on the other. I pulled into the service road by the shops and looked across the green, past the hotel and out over the bay. All the way down from town, the road is never further than a hundred yards from the beach. Beautiful on a summer's evening when the tide's in and the

bay is full of still blue water, but a bit drab when there's only acres of mud dotted with worm castes. My Mam always used to say that twice a day it's the Bay of Naples. Rest of the time it's definitely Wales.

I've got a soft spot for the West Cross hotel, it's where I had my first pint and where I later learned to play darts with Garry and Dave and Stewart, young and spotty, all four of us at least eighteen months off being legal.

"It's easy Mun. Talk in a deep voice, stare the landlord in the face, and make sure you ask for a particular lager, so he thinks you know your beer, see,"

That was the advice we'd had from Dai Booker, who was one of what my Mam used to call 'the rough boys', who lived up in the maze of terraces that were the Sandfields on the edge of town, and who'd been in and out of pubs for a good twelve months before we even attempted it.

"See, if you sound like you know the beer by name, they reckon you've been drinking for years," was old Dai's message. And, of course, in his case, it was almost true.

But not for Stewart, Garry, me and Dave. The first pub we'd tried it in, the Beaufort Arms at Norton, a bit nearer Mumbles, we'd all been standing there, looking like cub scouts on parade, sweaty hands turning over and over the carefully counted one-pound twenty-fives we'd been told a pint would cost. So Stewart goes first, with a brave attempt, staring mongoose-like at Fat Alan, the old landlord.

"Pint of lager and lime please." Then, all assured-like, "Make it Strongbow."

Christ, even I knew the difference, from the TV adds with the arrows. Alan fixed him with a straight look and said

“You want cherry and a slice with that?” And, before Stewart could stutter an answer, it was “Come on lads... Out. See you next year. Or the year after... Wait till you’re nearer eighteen eh?”

The sarky bastard. So out we trooped through the bar, trying not to look like we’d been chucked, even though everyone in the place knew it. We all wanted to die on the spot, and hated Fat Alan, and Stewart, in equal measure. But then Stewart was, as we told him for most of the next week, famous for being a total twat.

So, a couple of weeks later, with some market research under our belts and a bit more coaching from Dai, we selected the West Cross as The Pub Least Likely to Eject Underage Twats. It was a twenty-minute walk for me Garry and Dave, who were Mumbles boys, and just down the road for Stew, who lived at the top of West Cross. Best of all, nobody that knew our parents was likely to be in there. On the very first night we tried, it worked a treat, and we had a great time. Except for Dave, who had all his saved-up pocket money, went a bit wild with the pent-up frustration and the weeks of anticipation, swigged down four and a half pints of sweet lager and black as against our three, and spewed all over his shoes on the walk home.

Before our second visit, we figured out that playing darts would make us look like regulars, sort of lock us into the fabric of the place like old timers who’d be at this for years. So, pints ordered without challenge, we sauntered

over to the dartboard and, that first night of our newly-found adult lives, put a lot of darts into the tyre and the plasterwork under the board.

But, over the next twelve months, we got a hell of a lot better at darts, became almost accepted as regulars, and had our GCSE prospects sink without trace. I even bought my own darts that year, beautiful things that cost me a whole Saturday's earning from my schoolboy job at the carwash. The three darts had shiny brass heads, orange and purple feathered flights, and a smooth mock-leather case. But, most grand and grown-up of all, I kept them behind the bar. Always been fond of the West Cross ever since.

Business

Got laid last night. Not in the way of business, like – though there have been a few times that's nearly happened. More than once, I took one of the girls from Bala Terrace into town then back home at the end of the night and was offered business instead of the fare. I couldn't really think of a way to spill it to the boss that his fourteen pound fare was in a condom floating around the Bay, so I always turned down the business.

The girls had a pair of terraced houses knocked into one, all poshed up with brown double glaze, and that grey stone-cladding that half the steel workers in port Talbot spent their redundancy money on for their bought-up brick council houses. After two or three years the poor fuckers had to lash out most of the cash they had left to get it stripped off when the wall ties rotted and the front started to inch towards the road. But, the girls were well setup in Bala, about six of them at any one time, with heaps of cash walking in the door or gathered from the hotel rooms around town on any night of the week. The boys all knew them, and they knew all of us – and the cops and the bus drivers and the staff at the hotels. And the nurses and doctors in the clinic up at Mount Pleasant General. They were lovely, if a bit worn around the edges, and everyone looked out for them. Essential services really, in a port. Like the coastguards.

But, my girl came from a night down in Mumbles followed by a bit of a session in town down Wind Street. Not business; strictly pleasure. I'd hooked up with Parky and a few of the blokes from the rugby club, and after five or six

down the Rose, someone called one of the boys from Oystercabs and off we went into town.

Now, Wind Street is one of those places that makes anyone over forty shudder and write to the local paper. It used to be the banking street of the city, all posh granite fronted buildings, wide pavements and big porticoes with double oak doors. When I was a boy, in the daytimes it was awash with dark-suited blokes with grey hair and serious looking secretaries. Then the banks decided that no-one needed bank branches anymore, so a lot of the buildings were boarded. Nowadays it's side to side bars. Big Aussie style beer holes; swish post-modern bars with really uncomfortable aluminium stools and blocks of tellies hanging from the ceiling and slabs of slate to piss on in the bogs; themed Mexican bars where all the staff wear stupid sombreros and they have a special machine that can fill a tray of twenty tequila slammers at the same time; a couple of low-lit wood and leather bars playing French music for couples, and just plain old big pub bars for anyone who doesn't want to go abroad.

Stuck in the middle of all of this are a couple of old railwaymen's and steelworkers' clubs, traditional and old fashioned as they come. The old boys wander in and out of them on weekend nights, a fag stuck to their faces, trying to pretend the rest of it isn't going on. They hated the posh toffs who had the run of the street before, but they're none too comfortable with the spewing fighting mayhem of the current users either, even though plenty of them are the unemployed sons and daughters of unemployed dockers, steelworkers and railwaymen. Politics in action that is.

We did the slammers and lemon in Old El Paso, poured some expensive Swedish lager down ourselves in the technobar, then ended up jumping up and down to some stupid songs in the Aussie bar. Every time I went to the bog or bar, it was harder to find the boys, and a bit more difficult to recognise them when I did find them. After a trip to the bar to get me and Parker some more jumping oil, I looked into the heaving sweaty mass, couldn't see anything I knew anything about, so I just parked myself by a pillar and waited till he found me.

She asked me if she could wait by me because I looked alright and she'd lost her mates and she was a student and she was in her final year at the uni doing sports management and she was tired and in a bit she'd be going anyway, so just for a minute if I didn't mind?

She drank Parker's pint, and I had mine and then we had another one, and over the second glass of red in the wood and leather bar two doors down, we both shouted about how much we liked Jacques Brel, because he was so, you know, well, French, but not in a holiday way, though she'd obviously never heard of him because she kept saying Jack Bell. And somewhere after that we went back to mine.

In the morning I had one of *Withnail's* bastards between the eyes. I woke up before she did, had the ten second panic when I realised I wasn't on my own, and then tried to lie back and feel chuffed with myself. Ten-thirty: not bad given that we were still in that bar at three and getting Sean from the cab rank to run us to the all night off-licence at four. I guessed it must have been alright last night, cos as I lay there trying to think of a way to get to the

nurofen without disturbing her and without having to take my hand off her ass, she woke up, purred at me and snuggled in a bit tighter.

'Hello Don', she said. Nice voice. Hadn't really heard it properly last night, cos she'd either been yelling her head off so I could hear, or because I'd become so woolly eared because she been yelling in my ear for so long anyway. I see that often myself, when I pick up after the clubs, people are in the taxi yelling their bloody heads off at each other when they're a foot apart. Intimate.

And, quick as a flash, I remembered her name was Andrea. Good start anyway. It's always a bit awkward after a night in Wind Street, because most people who get home from there have had so much to drink that they're more likely to piss themselves, suffer lockjaw or die in the night than remember what they said, who they met, and what they did before they fell asleep.

'Hi Andrea', I said, anxious to show my sensitive and caring side straight off. I patted her ass.

She giggled, and then it all got a bit involved, and despite her beautiful body and her little tricks that made me feel like I was on a big dipper, I couldn't shake the ice-pick from the middle of my forehead. But, I did my best, and afterwards we fell in a heap and slept again till half twelve.

I took her down the front for a bit of brunch, and we sat at a table in the open in the café behind the tennis courts next to the prom. It would've been a lovely day except I still had the ice pick and that made me squint and scowl a bit at the sunlight, but she thought that was funny, and we kissed a lot and she said I looked like an old sea dog. I barked out loud when she said that and Sue

who manages the place said she'd throw a stick in the sea for me if I didn't shut it.

Andrea had to go at three, because she had a shift at Subway in High Street starting at five. We walked about a bit in the village and then went back to the flat. I did offer to take her home, but she laughed.

'You're off today Don. Don't go running me around. I'll get a bus from the square; it runs right into the Uplands and the end of my road. Honest, I'd rather do that. Anyway, it'll give me time to think up an excuse for why I left Claire in the bar...'

And she kissed me and opened the door. Then she turned, serious:

'Why are you taxiing Don? You're so clever. You're much cleverer than the blokes I know at uni. Gimme a ring, eh?'

And gone.

Wine bottles, clothes, duvets and the various CDs scattered all over the floor needed doing. So, instead I went for a walk to clear my awful bastard head, and to put Andrea into perspective. I knew the only things I needed were a Bloody Mary from The Fountainhead, followed by a walk along the cliff path from Mumbles to Langland, one bay towards Gower.

There's a lot of pubs in Mumbles, most of them surprisingly good still. The Fountainhead is one of those old village boozers that's been there since Mumbles was the oyster capital of the world, with upwards of two hundred rimy fishermen looking for a pint, a gin, a rum, or a brandy to ease the aches and

pains of hauling oyster baskets by the ton into open boats in all weathers. You didn't fuck about in a boozer like that unless you wanted to end up with a spike in your skull, wrapped in a tarpaulin and dropped over the side one dark night. Well I was looking for spike removal, so I would behave.

Terry has run the pub for decades, so he's just about got the hang of being a good landlord. No clever offers, no quiz nights, no fucking terrible steak for three quid, no games machine, no cocktails, and no telly - except for international days, when he drags his down from upstairs and stands it on the bar. He doesn't really give a fuck about tourists, but they get the same lukewarm welcome as everyone else, as long as they stay fairly quiet and don't make stupid comments about how great it all is, because, for most of the locals, it isn't. That's a pub.

I was glad no-one was in that I knew. Well, I did know everyone in the place really – if you live in a village that's going to happen, but I knew them enough to nod and say 'Aright?' to, rather than really talk to. So, the end result was that I could have my Mary on my tod, and put Andrea in some shape.

Did I enjoy her company?

Yes. And her ass.

Did I want to see her again?

With an ass like that it wasn't a question.

Did I like her?

Yes. And not just for her ass.

Did I think we were compatible?

As long as she didn't talk too much about sports management.

Did we have enough in common?

Don't know. Need to see her again to tell.

So, Andrea sorted, I had another Mary to put me on an even keel, and set off along the prom.

Into the Light

I let the wind pick at my jacket for a few minutes before doing it up, to let the fresh air blow the dust of the hangover off me. The Marys were kicking in smoothly and I began to feel a whole lot less like one of the walking wounded.

It was a great afternoon, clear with a sharp steely light, with gusts coming now and again up off the sea. Summer was definitely over, but autumn wasn't rushing us into the arms of winter just yet. The sun was up there, big and round, but a sharp whitish-grey rather than yellow. The tide had been coming in steadily since Andrea and I'd gotten up, and the Bay was just about full now. I love this place when the tide's in, not just cos it's beautiful – picturesque beautiful, but because it seems . . . complete, then. When the tide's way out and the Bay is a shiny, brown sheet of mud dotted with worm castes and broken up by long thin pools of trapped water, it just feels like a chunk has been snapped off the edge of the town, like something's been taken away. It's only here that I feel that way, and it's to do with the town. In all the bays around Gower, there's a different beauty, another beauty when the tide drops and you can see the rocks or cliffs or sand or weed – or in Port Eynon, even old trees long swamped by the tide, all shiny as the water drops, then drying in the wind or warming under the sun. It's a natural part of what was there when the tide was in, just an extension of it. But here, the town looks unfinished, ragged and like it's missing something, left high and dry.

There were a fair number of people about, having a bit of air on a shiny autumn day, all lovely with the water lapping half way up the wall. Lots of kids running about, ten yards in front of their parents, looking for things to throw at the sea, or trying to balance on the rough poured concrete of the sloping wall, feet at forty-five degrees to their legs. I used to do that, used to see if I could get from Knab Rock all the way back to the slipway by the bottom of Village Lane without treading on one of those patches of thick, green weed that made your feet go out from under you, or on one of the smooth patches where you couldn't grip. As I went along, crabwise, my arms stretched out to balance, my lips pressed tight, I'd say to myself over and over

'If I do this Mam and Dad will be so pleased and think I'm so strong and clever that I'll get an ice cream when we get to Fortes in the square.'

Most times, I had to give up early, come up on to the smooth black tarmac of the prom after a fall, my palms raw from the rough concrete where I'd crouched and gripped the wall to stop myself going into the water.

But, I made it once, all the way, and waited for them by the slip, glowing, but trying to be casual, not too triumphant. It was for them to realise, to come to an awareness of the scale of my achievement. But all Mam said was:

"Oh Don, look at your shoes mun, they're covered in muck. You sponge them off, now when we get in."

And I felt betrayed, and my eyes stung as much as my hands.

Out towards the pier, past Verdi's big ice cream place at Knab Rock, the numbers thinned out a bit. Most people leave their cars in the big car park at the square, stroll the mile or so to Verdi's and feel they've done enough. Everyone gets rewarded with a rest, the parents check their texts while their coffee cools and the kids see if they can tell what flavour they're eating with their eyes shut, then it's a slow wander back, as the tide begins to turn. Sunday done.

A lot of tourists moan that there aren't any pubs right on the sea wall, looking out over the bay. But, when they were all built, back in the days of the oyster fleets, when fishing was the mainstay for the place, the last thing blokes wanted in a pub was to look at the sea after they'd just spent ten or twelve hours in an open boat struggling with the bastard. So, if you want a pint, never mind the view, cross the road and get in one of the pubs tucked against the bottom of the cliffs, under the houses that straggle up Village Lane, Dickslade, or Clifton Terrace. There are still a fair number, but far fewer than there used to be when Stewart, Garry, me and Dave started to spread our wings a bit from the West Cross Inn, buoyed up by our abilities at darts and the fact we could confidently distinguish a cider from a lager and black by the time we were seventeen. Hardened we were.

At the pier it got busy again. Lots of ching, ching, and wailing sirens coming from the bandits in the amusements, and the smell of undercooked chips everywhere. As usual, in the Pier Hotel there were just one or two sad looking fishermen having a consolation pint, after five hours spent freezing their

bollocks off out at the end of the pier. Good day's work, to take home a mackerel that would escape down your plughole if you didn't wash it carefully.

"Thought I might give that number 2 line a go next week... And some of the new Lug."

"Aye."

"Aright then..."

"Tidy. Aye."

Always full of dynamic types, The Pier Hotel.

I dropped down onto the sand at the end of the road, into the little bay that faces across Inner Sound to Middle Head. With the tide just beginning to fall back, I could see the rip currents in the sound. In our family there was a tale about some great, great uncle of Dad's, who was part of the lifeboat crew who rescued the men off the *Danzig*, back in the 1880s. The family story was always told by Mam or Gramps, never by Dad. Either at the start or right at the end, he'd shake his head gently, smile softly at Mam and say,

"Oh, now love, I don't know about that really..."

The story goes that the German ship ran aground, that the crew were all taken off, and landed by the lifeboat in a hell of a storm. When the boatmen went back out to see if they could do anything with the barque, they got turned over

by a big wave, the poor bastards. The daughters of the lighthouse keeper on the Outer Head saved a few of the men, dragging them out of the water, but two or three died. And all that's true. But, Mam and Gramps tell it that one of the crew, great uncle Bob, was washed into the great cave on Middle Head. In there he lived for a day on winkles and seaweed till he was strong enough to drag himself to the entrance, where he was seen by a fisherman just before the tide came up to drown him. And, Gramps reckons, that's why the cave is called Bob's Cave to this day.

And in my head, a silky voice says

"Ah but Dhoneld, the winkles, do they not need boiling to eat?"

Yes, probably.

On the path around to Langland from Limeslade Bay I was pretty much on my own. It was still light, but over west the sun was low and pale, silvery on the sea. I could walk fast, as the path was dry and clear, so I figured I'd do it before dark, but only just. The ferns were beginning to turn brown and crisp, and the gorse was still bright yellow with flowers, so it all looked good as I stomped along, sea thumping the rocks on one side, the cliff rising coloured in the sun on the other.

As I got into Langland, I dropped down into Rotherslade bay. It's got its own name, but it's only really a separate bay when the tide is right up, cutting it off from the rest of Langland. I went down the damp echoey steps through

the rotting concrete balconies that the council put up in the Twenties, rattled over the stones on the upper part of the beach and climbed onto Donkey Rock. We used to jump off this a lot when we were young, but I haven't done it for a couple of years. When I was in school, the braver boys would dive right off the rock on the offshore side, but even though I'd stood a thousand times under the rock and seen it was twenty feet tall, when I was up there with sea all around I could never quite believe I wouldn't smack my head on the bottom.

I sat there while the tide dropped and the bay lost its identity and the sun fell behind Llangland head, and I thought about how I used to come up here with Lynne. Summer afternoons, we'd change into swim things on the beach, walk out and sit on the rock and just wait for the tide to rise around us. There'd always be some debate raging while the tide turned and pushed its way up the sand and stones, so it never felt like a long wait till we could swim. She was a great one for long, deep conversation, Lynne, which I guess was why we got on, 'cos I can rattle on a bit, too. She was proud of being a political animal, said it was impossible to be Welsh and not be. She'd learned Welsh, even though her parents didn't speak it, and she was a member of *Plaid* and had a lot of contact with *Cymdeithas yr iaith Gymraeg*. I wasn't sure, but her fury carried me along a bit.

I'd never met any real nationalists before, just seen them on telly and read about them in the *Evening Post* or *The Western Mail*. Mam and most of the people I had grown up with were a bit frightened of them I think, so they mocked them. Nearly all the teachers in school talked about them as out of

touch, extremists, people who were trying to save something that had died long ago. And of course, the folk we saw on telly were often from north Wales, or the west, Aberystwyth, so they talked different. A lot of them were from the university colleges, and that didn't help either – we just thought they had time to muck about with stuff that working people couldn't afford the luxury of worrying about. "A lot of old nonsense, the lot of them. Want to get real jobs, and then they'd see what it was we needed," was Mam's take on it all.

But Lynne was different. She was from Swansea, a Mumbles village girl from a Mumbles family, and that meant she didn't have any airs and graces. She told me once that when the devolution referendum was lost back in 1979 she cried with rage, and I can picture that, easily. We weren't together by the time of the '97 vote, but I expect she was up on a table somewhere, dancing. We were arguing about politics right up till when she left. Or, at least, she was arguing about politics and getting more fed up with me being more and more neutral. Could start a political argument on her own in a phone box, could Lynne – but at least she meant what she said and cared about what she felt.

We were in Spain, in the Basque country, when we split up. We were there because she wouldn't go to the rest of Spain in sympathy for the Basque struggle, which she said was just like Wales only more of the Basques had the guts to fight about their freedom. I wasn't sure, but off we went anyway. We had a good enough time, camping and stopping in little pensiones around the Biscay coast, from the French border, hopping from town to town all the way out to Santander and back. Then we stopped for about a week in Getaria, a little fishing place about thirty kilometres out of San Sebastian. I think it

reminded both of us of Mumbles, with its mount San Antón in place of the Head. That's where we split up.

We'd been bickering all week, her getting more and more angry with me about not getting off my 'neutral bloody arse'. She was furious with me for not going back to Lancaster after Mam died, for not using the brains she said I had, for staying in Mumbles, for the way I accepted the state of Swansea, for the way I wasn't sad about not knowing Welsh, and for the way I didn't get so upset about the Basques. She was furious with me by this time for almost anything and everything.

We were half-way down a long flight of steps that ran from the San Salvador church down to the port. There were a good hundred steps with little alleys and the odd street running off to the side. Big wide mule steps they were, built in dark, hard stone, with deep orange-washed walls on either side. It was hot as hell at the top, where the sun hit the square, but the air cooled as we took each step down. We'd stopped to have a real face to face,

"... and you don't ever give a bloody toss, Don, not about anything. Anything, mun. Not about me, not even about yourself. You can do better than this you soft bastard!" and she stamped down a step.

I dropped down, to be level. "Christ Lynne, I've only just sorted stuff out after Mam. Give me a bloody chance will you?" and down one step I went.

"I can't do this anymore Don. No more. I'm fed up with it. You've just stopped, ground to a stupid, bloody halt. What are you doing? What have you got in front of you? Why do you expect me to grind to a halt too? Why can't you just see...?"

For a second, as she lifted her arms in front of her, I thought she was going to hit me, but instead, she started crying; really deep, sad churning cries.

For Lynne, crying was rare. She cried with a kind of dry raging sob when she was angry, cried in a way that seemed like she'd had the wind knocked out of her when she was surprised or happy, whooping while the tears ran down her cheeks, but to cry when she was upset was not a thing I'd seen a lot. It frightened me I think, because she seemed to lose control – and Lynne was always in control.

"Come on love, it's not like that. I'm just settling back into things, sorting myself out for a few months, then I'll be up again." I can remember those words so well: - sorting myself out for a couple of months.

"You stupid bastard. It's been nearly two years and you've just given up! Well I haven't and I'm not going to!"

The words were wrenched out, her voice deep and hoarse, but so loud they echoed up and down the stairway. From somewhere over our heads, some shuttered window, a deep man's voice grumbled. We both looked up, and the pressure fell away. Lynne sighed, really deep.

In a voice so controlled that it was really shaky, she said, "I'm sorry Don; I mean it. I can't go on with this any more. I can't do it," and she took a big breath. "Come back with me and let's get out of Swansea. We could go to Aber and you could go back to the uni, finish your degree. . . or to Trinity, in Carmarthen, if you don't want to be too far from Swansea. Come on, let's get involved, let's do something. Please Don, let's do something?" and she started crying again.

I was lost. I couldn't say what I wanted, couldn't promise that we'd pack our lives and head somewhere, but I couldn't for the life of me work out why. I stood there, with my stupid mouth half open, leaning towards her, my arms moving up, then down again, ever so gently, ever so slowly.

Eventually, she spoke to me again, carefully and slowly, as if I was a child, "I'm going to go back to the room now, love, and I'm going to pack and get to the station. Will you come Don?" A pause, then softly, like a sigh "Please."

I could feel sweat running down my side from my armpit, and I could hear a dog yapping somewhere in one of the houses. "Lynne love, let's just hang on a minute here. Look, it's late now. . . Let's have a bit of dinner and a bottle of that good red we had the other night, and talk it through eh?"

But she'd already moved up onto the step above me. "Don, love, I am going up. Come on. Before it's too late. Do it Don..?" and she stretched a hand out to me as she took another step up.

I couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't feel anything properly. All I had a sense of was the walls towering on both sides, and this bloody mud-brick stairway carving up the middle.

She kept her hands stretched out, took another step, looked at me, puzzled, as if she didn't quite recognise me, and then turned. I watched her go, the fine brown legs carrying her further and further towards the sunlight.

Off the Vine

Dropping off down at the entrance to the Quadrant shopping centre. Same sort of place as anywhere else in the whole UK: a nice high roof so the background music and announcements can echo and be indecipherable, fake marble floor and all the chain shops set out in a V-shape, or a criss-cross, or a loop. In the middle, wherever the arms of the arcade intersect, there'll be a seating area where local garages display cars or the local charities collect, and a load of seats or benches where the sad, the mad, the lost and the lonely hang out, day after day. And when they get fed up with the Quadrant, or get moved on, they can drift across to the bus station, without even having to step outdoors.

Sadly, though it gives town a bit of glitz, the Quadrant has killed off a lot of the old shopping streets. High Street is now a desolate run of amusement arcades and pound shops, in between the boarded up units, and the Kingsway's much the same. Round the back of the shopping centre's one of the oldest pubs in town, The Bell. It's been extended and new bits added, so I think that only about ten feet of the bar is original space, but it does date back to the sixteen hundreds, so at least some old stuff remains.

Just as I was pulling away from my drop off, a bloke comes marching out of the Bell, quick as you like, straight across the pavement and into the road, nearly under my bumper.

I stood the car on its nose.

He's fortunate I was only just pulling off, and very fortunate I was watching the pub as I started, otherwise we'd be waiting for an ambulance now. He stood, just six inches away from the bonnet, arms out colour gone from his face, frozen by the possibilities that were rolled up in that moment he stepped out.

Well, I'm just pushing myself away from the wheel, and checking the mirror to make sure no bus or other one of the lads is going to pile into me, when the bloke comes around to the window, all in the same sort of rush.

Now, a pub, a near miss, a shabby bloke, shock, a sudden march to the window... all made me wind the pane down just a few inches, not enough for a fist or hand to get in. Standard Saturday night stuff – except this was Wednesday afternoon.

But it turned out he was okay about it all:

"Aw... sorry, wus. Didn't mean to get in the, uh, in the way, like. Just crossing see... going over there to the rank... in a rush an forgot the time, like..." and he dried up, staring somewhere beyond me.

Traffic was beginning to pull around us.

And then, he started again:

"Sorry, mun. You're a cab arntew, eh? Can you take us up Penrhyn?"

And all in a rush I knew him from his ride home, with the cubes full of belongings and his bright hopes. Derailed, by the looks of things. Deranged, though? Not quite, but approaching it. He looked bloody awful, standing by the car. His hair was growing out the military number one cut, and poking out at all angles, he looked like he hadn't brought a razor home with him in that luggage,

and the clothes were filthy. But his eyes were most striking, darting around, not focussing on what was in front of him.

Well, he might seem a bit dodgy today, but I felt I knew him, and he could definitely do with a ride by the look of him. He probably needed to be off the street. I'd met the bloke underneath that last time, so that was all he could revert to really, which was reassuring. It's the bit underneath that you don't know about people that can often give the nasty moments. Someone all smiles and friendliness might be a right bastard beneath, when the bile's up and the boozy cheer is ebbing – just like a tide dropping on a beach, you see the rocks beneath only when the water drops. At least I'd seen this bloke in his normal state last time.

"Yeah, alright. Hop in quick then."

I might have seen the other side of him, but I dropped a quick radio call to Jen on the desk anyway, told her exactly where I was and gave her the address of where I was going, asked her to give me a buzz in half an hour. Just to be sure.

And this time, he planted himself in the back. The same nervous boy was in there somewhere, but all the bits of him were muddled up, and he was distracted, so he was only partly talking to me. As we pulled away, he said all the things he'd said on the road over again. Then, as if he'd only just noticed, he said:

"Well, there's a nice car this is..." and he drifted into silence again.

The big question for me was whether to remind him about the ride he'd had a couple of months ago. Probably not. Use it if he gets difficult, but

otherwise, don't rake things up. There's obviously a bad luck story unfolding here, and most people who star in one of those don't want reminding of the fact.

As we got further up through town and past Cowyn, he was giving short bursts of comment, not to me, but to write a script for himself, to register his view and feeling. To hit back a bit. Then, he took me completely by surprise. He leant forward and said:

"You picked me up. When I was coming home, by the station. I remember you."

So, yes, I said I remembered him a bit, thought, now he'd brought it up, that I did recognise him, and great, how was it all going? The last bit was a mistake, but there's not a lot you can say when you're into a run like that. Anyway, we did a sort of scattered recollection of what he was coming home for; of all the things he'd told me that first ride. The bitterness and defeat shouted out.

I had a different view this time. It's a partial view you get of all the fares, not just because they're in the car for a short time, but because you only ever see bits of them, angles on them, slices of them.

Last time, he'd been in the front, so I saw him from my left, half profile, hands and legs more prominent than face, and telling me a lot about how he felt. Voice matters then, as well, and you try to match tone or meaning with hands and other movements you can see. It's hard to ever see the face, if you want to stay on the road.

When they sit in the back, it's all done with voice and through the letterbox shape of the mirror. You get to be very aware of who's leaning forward in their seat, and why they're doing it. Some lean forward to be polite, as if they want to make it easier for you to hear and engage, but others lean forward in a way that says, without saying, that they're squaring up to you. It's chest beating really with people like that – and it's not just the blokes who do it in the car. Some of the girls who go home late Saturday nights after a hard night of shots and lager with no shag or even snog at the end of it can really take it out on you. And, you clock the ones who lean way back into the seat, and through the mirror you can see who's making eye contact, and who talks forward but looks sideways, away from you, out of the car and into some odd inner space.

This bloke was all over the place, sweaty and haphazard. One minute he was breathing down my neck, the next he's flopped back in the seat and talking to the window, to the outside world. But mostly he was talking to himself.

It was hard to piece it all together, because each set of comments was spat out, hard words, sharp phrases, like little stabs at me, at the people going by, at the world that had done him down.

He tried to tell me about the Nicki, about what had happened, but the comments just got fractured, broke up like his plans:

"And she said she'd go through with it see, when I got home. She said it was fabulous... we'd get be sorted out, like... Now, she's fuckin' given up... Five minutes she gave it, five fuckin' minutes..."

Which I was guessing meant old Nicki hadn't come through with the domestic bliss plan. Well, it must've been a shock to her too mate.

And so we chugged up Cowyn hill again, and into the estate, back through the broken down garden walls, past the dappled horses tied to big iron stakes on verges and past the armoured shop fronts, while he kept up the distracted, bitter mumbling. No job to be had, mum and stepdad sick of him around the house, Nicki pouring cold water, then wanting out, and missing his mates, his tried and trusted, his blood brothers.

And I put in the odd word of sympathy, the occasional half-hearted word of advice, the multiple mmms and ohhhs that he didn't really listen to.

I realised as we crossed the green and turned into his road that he'd got no object for his speech – it didn't matter that I was here really, he's turned his words, snarling, on himself. I wasn't frightened of this; it was self-harm really.

United

I picked up the grand old gent from the Marlborough quite a few times over the next few months, and I got to know him quite well. He was relaxed and warm, kept telling me to call him Luis, but for some reason I felt better calling him Mr Rivera and had stuck with that; I couldn't get comfortable on first names with someone who seemed to stretch so far back – and 'Señor' just felt a bit too High Chaparral. His search for a place to buy was going strong, so it was lots of trips to estate agents, and even more trips to some beautiful houses and flats in Caswell and Langland, usually overlooking the beach or the cliffs, with views straight out over the Bristol Channel. Beautiful homes, but not big, as there was just going to be him living there. He said he wasn't in a hurry, the right place was more important than a quick place, and he told me more than once, without any trace of humour,

"I've come here to die. I want to make a good death, peaceful and calm, in a place where I feel at home; it won't do to rush..."

When he said that, even from the first, it didn't seem eerie or depressing, I could hear and feel from him just how settled he was, that he'd nearly – but not quite, had his time. When the time came, he'd go calmly; no raging against the dying of any light for him.

We'd talked a good deal, and over the weeks and then months, he began to unwind, mostly about immediate things happening around the town, rather than stuff about him or his life. A lot of the chit-chat had been about areas, houses, and about his memories of what Swansea was like nearly

seventy years ago when he'd first been here. When I asked him about the past, which I did a lot, his replies were almost always about things, places, news events, other people, but rarely about him or his family. One day though, just as we were about to head back home from seeing one little bungalow that sat in the lane up to the golf course looking out over Langland bay, he started to tell me a bit more about who he was.

We had just come out of the viewing – I seemed to view everything with him these days, the two of us pootling around each property, muttering to each other about the size of rooms, the views, the heating, storage space, the layout of the kitchen and whatever else struck us. Must've seemed a bit like a couple to the various estate agents who showed us around, but that didn't bother me. As we got outside this place, the estate agent, an unctuous young kid called Malky, with gelled hair and a cheap suit, needed to rush on to his next appointment, so he left us to it.

"Just have a think and give me a bell, eh Luis? Sought-after, highly sought-after, this, so don't leave it too long, eh?" he called as he oozed himself into his purple company Astra.

Mr Rivera had turned back to look over the outside one last time, and was poking about near the gate that led through to the lovely little back garden rising in three terraces against the hillside. He ignored Malky, so I made some indefinite reply about being in touch soon, and waved the little shit off.

I knew that something about the place had struck Mr Rivera. The house was halfway up the little road that led only to the golf-club – so quiet, with no through traffic. He'd only need to watch out for the Jaguars and Mercs that'll

come down the lane a bit wobbly after the owner's had too many in the clubhouse. Standard stuff, goes on around all the boozers in Mumbles. It's usually the older folk, tottering out of the pub or club in the late afternoons, just ever so slightly unsteady. They won't have had a lot in real terms, but when you're seventy-odd and built like a withered whippet, a couple of pints or gins weigh heavy against the centre of gravity. Into the little run-around they'll get, doors and bones a bit creaky with age, and they're off, over-revving and hogging the white line for the two miles home. They'd end up killing someone or dying themselves if they lived in a bigger city, but here they seem to get away with it for long enough.

It was a pretty little place, set about twenty feet above the level of the lane, so nicely private, with a drive that curved up and into a circular bay in front of the door. A couple of large bedrooms, good sized living and dining, with a kitchen that stared straight over the Bristol Channel. The whole front had beautiful views over the bay, and the hill rising behind to make it feel a sheltered but not overshadowed. It faced more or less due south, so the light would be lovely all day, and because the garden rose behind, it didn't fall into the shade of the house. Elegant – like Mr Rivera; I reckoned this was the place.

I got in the car, and after a few minutes Mr Rivera finished looking and came over. He sat in the front this time, and I could tell he wanted to hang on a while, just taking the atmosphere of the place before we left. So, I just sat there next to him, without starting the car; the two of us, like a pair of day-trippers, looking out over the bay, the water foaming white as the tide moved up over Crab Island and across the still-wet sand.

"Beautiful, eh?" he said, and I wasn't really sure whether he meant the bay, the house, or perhaps even this moment. He wasn't asking for a reply really, so I just let his words hang. It was easy, really easy, no awkwardness in sitting there. Each of us at ease and a bit lost in our thoughts. And then, after a good few minutes, he started:

"We were on the coast in Colombia for years, in Barranquilla. I don't expect you know it, eh? It is a port, and where most of the people who came to Colombia landed. From there, great riverboats carried people inland, up the Magdalena river. Italian, German and French, and many Arabs, they all came out of the ships and flooded on, up the brown river, through the valley towards Bogotá and the centre. My grandparents, they came to Colombia that way, my mother's people from France, the south, my father's people from Tangiers.

I was born in Barranquilla, and we lived there until I was four. Then we moved to Palenque, in the mountains, father, mother, me and Guadalupe our maid. My older brother had died of cholera when I was five, which I think was why my parents wanted to move away from the river-mouth and the heat of the coast. Father had worked hard, become a successful architect in the coastal cities. Now we were moving to the mountains, and nearer Bogotá, so father could build his reputation, we would all be healthy, and we could be happy."

He dropped the window a couple of inches, and a fresh salty breath came in off the bay storm during the night. He leant right back in the seat, and seemed to be telling the story to me and to himself at the same time, as if he

was trying to order the events, to make some sense out of them once and for all. I was nodding, uh-huh-ing, but he never met my gaze, and didn't need my interest.

"Palenque was a beautiful town, sitting where the upland plains met the high mountains, right on the only main road up to the mountain passes that were usable for most of the year. Out of the mountains came cool fresh air, and a strong, foaming river. Over thousands of years, the river had patiently cut a deep channel into the soft brown rock, around which the town was built. So...

He laughed, held both hands out, a little apart, palms down.

"Yes, Palenque spread out on either side of a great gorge, which wound its way across the high plain towards the coast, getting gradually shallower and shallower as the land around it dropped. Where Palenque sat, the gorge was forty-five, perhaps fifty metres deep, with steep rocky sides.

"The town grew, becoming a regional centre, and new, neat white houses stretched for many kilometres on each side of the cut. But, because of the gorge, Palenque was almost two towns, like a pair of twins facing each other over the top of the ravine. A shady public square with a bandstand existed on each side, a small vegetable market and a little meat market, a school, a sport stadium and a fountain. And, between the two parts of the town, a little road, barely more than a track, ran zigzagging down each side of the gorge to a bridge, halfway down.

Nearly one hundred years ago the Casteña family built the bridge, and had been charging for crossings ever since. At the southern side of the span was a little tollhouse, made of rough brown blocks cut from the sides of the

ravine when the bridge was built. The roof was made of thick stone slabs laid like slates in rows across the hefty rafters. All over the stone now there was a spongy layer of dark green moss, insulating the hut from winter chills and summer heat. Latest in a long line of gatekeepers occupying the tollhouse's two small rooms was Jesus, a dark, strongly built man with great shaggy eyebrows and huge hands that quite circled the gnarled wooden pole that barred the way or rose when payment was made.

In summer, Jesus sat on a wooden bench catching the sun from the north for most of the day; at late-afternoon, the cliff swung its huge shadow into place and locked all light from the cut. When the shadow started across the gorge and the light began to fail, Jesus lowered and locked the bar into place. In winter, he sat inside by the little tollhouse fireside, burning logs brought down for him on a grumbling mule once a week. Travellers then rang a great brass bell, all green with damp and age, to summon Jesus. You could hear him mutter and groan at leaving his hearth, but, once outside, he'd have a joke or a word for any traveller, provided they paid their fee. As he joked with his customers and squinted against the half-light of the gorge, Jesus' superb eyebrows rose and fell like the barrier he operated.

If you could not, or would not pay, you carried on down the narrowing track to the shady bottom of the gorge. In summer you could cross the river on twelve great, grey stepping stones around which the water sucked and gurgled. The track was damp and muddy all year round down here, the light strained and weak; the stepping stones wet and mossy even on the hottest days, and the slightest sounds bounced and echoed against the rock walls. In the depth

of winter and during the spring thaws, the water rose two metres above the stones, roaring and plunging down the ravine. Then, you paid Jesus - or made a fifteen-kilometre trip to the next bridge, where the ravine was shallower and the river calmer.

Jesus spent every night in the same tavern at the corner of the square just on the eastern edge of the gorge. Over the four mugs of strong country wine he drank each and every night, he'd give long, comically exaggerated accounts of who had been across his bridge that day, where they had been going and what they carried. He knew who was having new furniture, whose relatives were coming to stay, whose trade was good and whose declining. And, always, he had a note of those too poor or too mean to pay the toll, for he'd watch them from his bench or through the little window of the house as they slithered down the lower, muddy track to the stepping stones below.

When I was six, for an adventure on a hot and dusty June day, Guadalupe took me down past Jesus' bridge and across the river on the great stepping stones. I was excited during the early descent, fascinated by the new scene, the narrowing path, the hush of the gorge, the intensity of the air. But, as we reached the dim, gravelly riverbed, I became frightened of the thickened sounds, the heavy damp, and the dark water, down there in the bowels of the town. My step did not slow, though I wanted to stop, to turn back, to run back up the path to the light; I held Guadalupe's hand with no more pressure, but neither did I let go. I was, I thought, brave and dignified.

When he heard of it, my father was very angry with Guadalupe, not because of the danger of the track and the crossing, not because of the brown

mud and green slime on my clothes, but because she had taken me the 'poor people's way'. He stormed about the dining room, in a fury that Jesus would have seen us making our way past the tollhouse, down and down to the floor of the gorge to cross. He knew the tavern would hear of our journey and he seethed that bar-room jokes were being made about his son, his family, his honour. And Guadalupe cowered as his voice raised and the veins stood out on his neck. Just how, he asked her, did she imagine he would ever build a reputation amongst the people of this town if she took his son down into the gorge 'like some peasant' to cross the river?

We moved to Palenque because it was in the centre of rich farmlands, where people had money and wanted things built. Father talked about the schools, the hospitals, the town halls, perhaps even the churches and cathedrals – here Guadalupe would assume a devout expression and cross herself – which he was going to build for all the people in Palenque and the other growing upland towns. But we had to wait for such glories to come, because no-one knew him yet, because he had no name at first, no reputation. And so, he started with little jobs, an extension to a house here, an alteration to a shop there, small jobs, unworthy of my father's genius. Until he hatched the plan that finally made his name, and ruined us.

Jesus' nightly stories meant that all the town knew who was going where and with whom. Every errand, every new arrival in town, every sale or transfer of goods came to the notice of Jesus and, through his tavern audience, so, to all the town. When people wanted to move between east and west without notice they either trekked the fifteen kilometres south, or when the river

permitted, waited till the shadow had settled in the gorge and Jesus was safely in the tavern, in front of his wine. Then, the gorge was quietly alive with figures making their way down the slimy path to the stones and back up. Such was the understanding throughout the town of the secret journeys between east and west, particularly those of an amorous nature, that an expression grew up. Never would one say 'he is having an affair' or 'he is seeing so-and-so'; instead the gossips would simply note that 'tiene lodo en las rodillas...' – "he has mud on his knees," and all would understand. If ravine travellers passed one another in the dark, eyes would stay on the path, there would be no greeting, but a vague, coughing grunt on either side. Many trousers and shoes were sponged clean of dark brown mud and thick green slime in the early morning hours.

Father saw his reputation grow, and as a little boy by his table in the study, I saw that his drawings became larger, the lines more pronounced, the flourishes more extravagant. Now, he was consulted on a rebuilding of the town hall; next, of the court-house, soon after on the design of a lavish summer house on the mountain slopes for the wealthiest merchant. His wait was over, he was becoming recognised. And, during the summer of my eighth year, he began to gather support for a new project, his greatest yet.

This time, as he explained to mother and me at dinner, he would not work for any individual, but would work for the whole town; he would be a patron, a benefactor for the whole community: he would build a bridge: a brand new bridge. He stood up at the table, arms outstretched to demonstrate the scale of the enterprise. Glasses shook and cutlery rattled. We sat silent, mother dutifully impressed, me adoring and amazed by his daring, by the

breadth of his vision, the range of his generosity and imagination, Guadalupe, at her place by the table's end, was removed but transported by respectful and adoring interest.

"I will build a bridge, such a modern bridge, with soaring stone arches," and he reached nearly to the chandelier to show me the grandeur of those arches.

"It will be a bridge so marvellous that – and he sought for some expression of scale, of magnificence – that *two* carts can pass at its middle... with pavements for travellers on foot and little towers at either end!

I could tell, even then, that Father was developing the bridge in his mind even as he spoke, but I loved and respected him so much that I knew these things would come true, because he had told them to me..."

And then, for the first time, he turned to me from the passenger seat, and that grand old face was tight around the wry smile, the eyes distant, looking back over decades, and moist in the dark brown skin. But, he never lost his focus, never drifted off the subject. And, I could see that it took some strength, but he went back to it. This wasn't just musing now, but a purging. It's funny, but we get a lot of that, and you get used to the signs – I guess we're a lot cheaper than therapists, even with the meter running.

So, back he went, into the nineteen-thirties, digging for the truth, for something I couldn't see yet, but something that had brought him to this point.

"And, I remember, so clearly, how Father positioned knives to show the parapets, and drove two wine glasses across the table from opposite sides to show the ease with which the carts would pass. But, as he moved his glass, a ripple in the tablecloth caught the base and upended it. Mother gasped as a great red stream surged between the knives, ran either side of the plate before her, and on, in two thin streams, into her lap. Guada kept her head bowed.

As work proceeded, details of the astounding bridge, its qualities and marvels, began to circulate around the town. The respect I had for Father now seemed widespread; out and about with Guadalupe, or sometimes with Father himself, I was aware of little knots of people who would doff their hats, or nod respectfully as we walked or trotted by in our glossy little carriage. Most wonderful to people was the news that the bridge would sit astride the top of the gorge, carrying travellers far over the river and the old stone bridge below, and it would be free, free forever. In our household, and amongst our neighbours, for almost a year before my father even saw the first stone cut for the 'new' bridge, we began to refer to the Casteña bridge as 'the old bridge'.

Father's study became a centre of operations. He was locked away behind the heavy oak door for hours each day in conference with the mayor, the council, the aldermen, the carters' federation, the mason's guild, the ranchers' representatives, the doctor, and the chief of police. He would sweep

through the house with drawings, rushing from one meeting to another, from one fundraising dinner to the next. My mother took on the civic duties of an important wife, and entertained many ladies she did not really know or like. Guadalupe and I stayed out of the way of such important goings on, in the playroom or in the little walled garden of our house, but she would take me almost every morning after my lessons were done, to the spot where we could watch the bridge inching its way across the great ravine.

Progress was impressive, across the spring, the summer and into the winter of my eighth year; but my father suffered setbacks in his work, such as when a scaffold collapsed and plunged six men into the gorge below. Two of the unfortunates landed on the old bridge beneath, while the other four went screaming and cartwheeling into the foaming, flooded river. None survived, and my father was in a bad humour for days while work was suspended and funerals held. In the taverns a rumour spread that Jesus had been ordered by the Casteña family to charge the two deceaseds' families for their landing on the old bridge.

As work got nearer its conclusion, anticipation was intense. I swelled with pride as my father recounted over dinner the progress made each day. I would ask him almost every evening whether it was true that the bridge would be free, whether it really was built of solid stone, whether two carts could indeed pass in the middle. He would swell and smile, and tell me all the details, as he had the day, or week, before. And, I always wanted to ask but never did, whether I could be there in the first across the wonderful new structure, by his side. At night and in quiet moments of the day I used to imagine myself waving

and saluting the cheering crowds as I was carried over the gorge, in majesty, by the first cart to cross from east to west. But I think I always knew this would never be.

Under the bunting, and to the sounds of the town band, it was the mayor who went across first, closely followed by my father at the head of a large group of the better-off merchants from our region. As Guadalupe pointed out to me while we watched the goings on from our now customary spot on the side of the ravine, it was those merchants who had paid for the bridge, and it was right and proper that they should be able to cross first. I nodded and pretended to understand, but I hated them all for taking my place in that first procession, that first ride across my father's great free bridge. The mayor made a speech at each end of the bridge, to rapturous applause, and then my father stood to speak, but his words were drowned out when someone let off firecrackers in the crowd, the carnival atmosphere took over completely, and some sheep got onto the bridge.

In the months following the opening, my father's reputation stood high. Callers to our house were many, and commissions for grand projects flooded in. Soon, my father was travelling to the capital to advise on a new school, and again, on the building of a new church hospital for the second city of the state. Carriages came and went, and crossing our courtyard was always a stream of well-dressed gentlemen, important men, on their way to see father, or leaving

after an important conversation about a new project. Papers came and went, plans were drawn, copied, re-drawn.

But, in the town, things moved differently. In the early weeks, and even for several months, people felt joy, relief, excitement at crossing the great structure. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, the bridge itself was a place to be and be seen, with people strolling back and fore across its modern pavements. Then things started to change. Rumours began to spread of rows between shopkeepers and traders in the fruit markets of the east and west. It was said that prices were being cut by Ramirez in the east, to drive Sanchez of the west out of business. Weeks later, constables had to be called to a crowd in the meat market, where western farmers were accused of running off cattle destined for butchers in the east. Loyalties became intense, and in some parts of town people even wore badges with large letters E or O for east or west.

And in the privacy of many homes across Palenque, too, things became strained. Guadalupe would not tell me all the details at the time, but I heard enough from adults talking to know that many affairs were being pushed to breaking point, and this was putting strain on marriages all over town.

Mistresses, long the subject of erratic visitations blamed on the river being too high, the track being washed out, there being too many people about, a moon too full . . . were impatient now the bridge was there. Surely now, there was no journey that could not be made, if the heart was truly in it?

Friends and relatives previously paying lip service to their duties, and used to making visits the rarity of which was blamed on the price of the toll or the state of the ravine below, now had no reason not to call, to invite, to entertain. Families found themselves thrown together, each had no reason not to call on each, and the young could not forget the old. People shuddered and recoiled, unaccustomed to such warmth and proximity.

One October morning, Guada and I were walking in the eastern square when one of those heavy autumn rains came upon the town. Fearing for our health and not wanting to make me walk home, Guada sent a messenger for the fine, black, family coach father had recently bought. Excited at the treat, I perched on the edge of the soft bench, held the curtain held back and travelled with my face pressed to the window. As we left the square and the coach rocked its way past the eastern market, voices were raised about us. Guada told me to sit back, and herself leaned forward to see what was causing the commotion. Before I could move though, the window of the coach was shattered, mud stones and glass were flying all about the inside of the beautiful coach.

"Go, drive, quick," Guada hissed to Ramon. The horses were whipped and the carriage lurched forward throwing me and Guadalupe into a heap on the bench. In minutes we arrived back in the house, and we had shaken most of the mud from our clothes, and pushed the glass from our feet.

Upstairs, checking my skin for cuts, and sponging mud from my hair, Guada told me that such things sometimes happened close to the Fiesta de San Fernan, that crowds were often "silly", that spirits were high.

"They think so much of your father; they do not know how to properly show their admiration and respect. The ignorant people get carried away, and take their joy too far," she said.

But I knew I had heard the man who threw the mud. There was no mistaking the shout that 'Rivera has done for us with that damn bridge...'

At dinner, father was tense and sharp with mother. He didn't speak to me directly, but snapped at Conchita that his soup was cold, his beef was thickly cut, his wine glass dirty. And afterwards, without kissing me goodnight, he went out to see the mayor.

Throughout December as the grey clouds gathered over the mountains, the nights became frostier, and our staff began to leave. First Conchita, in a flood of tears, apologising to Mother that she had to go, that she'd had word from her family about her sister's illness, that she had no choice. Then Ramon left, then Silvio, the gardener. New staff came, but they were not kind like Conchita and the others. They were what Guada called 'low people', but she said, they would do until we had time to find better.

Mother began to have headaches more and more, and was often shut away in her room for days. Guada would take me in to see her after breakfast and before dinner if mother was not getting up. In the bedroom, mother's heavy curtains were drawn almost completely, though the winter days were never bright. I was glad that Guada went in with me because I was afraid of

the dark, and I suppose, a little afraid of mother too, in her heavy black shawl, propped in the big, dark bed.

Guada and I never seemed to go out any more, and I was always put to play or draw or study in the courtyard when there was any sun or in the big drawing room when it was cold and a fire had to be lit. Then, I used to lie on the big woollen rug and draw, or curl up in one of the heavy leather chairs and read, feeling the fire-warmth on my face. I sometimes heard father and mother talking in his study when she was up and about, or sometimes there would be raised voices in her room when she had been in bed for two days together. Guada said that it was just father being strong, and encouraging mother to get well and get up. On the bright days, I could play in the courtyard all I wanted, running around the veranda, or making paper boats to float in the little fountain. I used to love to watch them as they softened, became sodden and sank to the bottom of the clear fountain pool. Guada laughed at my elaborate preparations for retrieving the sunken boats. First, I would take off my canvas coat, then the heavy velvet waistcoat that father had brought me from the capital, then finally, standing straight, with arm out, I would roll my white flannel shirt right to my shoulder.

"You look like a prize fighter!" Guada would giggle. And she would try to adopt a serious face while I plunged my arm into the freezing pool. Of course, she would rush for a towel, and bundle me indoors the second I had the sodden boat in my hand.

"A chill is just the start of a cold, and a cold is a killer," she said sternly every time as she bundled me to the fireside.

It was the morning before the day of the Immaculate Conception, when we were preparing all our lights and candles for the house, that father went off to see the governor of the region. He planned to travel to the city that day, rest on the holiday, see the governor early and return the next day. He was very agitated and snapped at Guada because my shoes were not so shiny when she took me in to say goodbye to him. I was tired at having been woken and dressed so early, and I don't think I was very warm to him. Mother was distracted and distant all day, and she forgot to let me light the first lamp, like I always did. Guada said very quietly and quickly, as mother was saying goodnight to me after dinner,

"Madam, the boy. His lamp, he will be disappointed..." and without a word to Guada, Mamma told me to wait, rushed off and found a taper, and we went to light the lamp. But I had heard. The holiday passed, and I enjoyed the lights and candles all around the house, but I was sad we did not go out, did not go and walk on the bridge.

I began to get excited, for now the holiday was gone, Christmas was soon to come. I was excited also because father was coming home that evening. I went to bed late, very tired and disappointed that father had not come home before I had to sleep.

"He will be here when you wake," Guada said with a smile. "But he will be cross if you do not sleep, so now, goodnight lamb." And she kissed me before swinging the room door a little way shut.

And now Mr Rivera sat forward. He put his hands on the dash, and looked across at me. He smiled, and seemed to relax a little.

"This next is very hard for me Don. I have not spoken of this for many, many years. I don't know why I am telling you, now, here, but it seems honest..."

I started to splutter about no need, that we all needed some things to stay in there, but he paid no heed. He was still looking at me – or rather, looking through me, but he wasn't even in the car, he was way back there in Palenque.

I woke and realised something was wrong. I could hear shouting, crashing, glass breaking, a scream from in the house. I jumped from bed and started to pull a coat around me, to go and find Guada, or even my mother.

Before I had time to get slippers on my feet, Guada rushed into the room

"Quickly, bring your jacket, move, lamb, move." And she seized my hand to drag me from the room.

As we crossed the courtyard, I could see the flickering of fires from the drawing room, and there broken roof tiles on the floor. I started to squirm, I knew something bad was happening, but Guada kept hold tight and rushed me to the carriage, ready harnessed by the gate. "In!" she hissed and shovelled me up and through the door.

Mamma was already in the carriage, and she grasped me to her. It all happened so fast, so noisy, so much smoke...'

His hands, normally brown and elegant, were thin, veined, stretched tight and white on the top of the dash. But his gaze never shifted.

'Out we went in the carriage, and lurched in a curving path down the street, past a crowd shouting, some throwing stones, and many carrying burning torches. Mamma tried to sit me down, but I shook her hand from my shoulder and watched at the window as the crowd came in and out of focus. Faces were twisted in rage and mouths were wide open, shouting – shouting at us.

We went down the street and came to father's great bridge, with the crowd behind. I could see flames in the windows of our house, and I thought perhaps it might be alright, that the fountain might put out the flames.

As we rattled onto the bridge, a body of state troopers ran towards us, past the coach and met the crowd at the tower on the eastern edge. We slowed and came to a halt just beyond the western edge of the bridge, and the crowd, held by the troopers at the far end stopped also. After all the noise, for a second, it was still and quiet. And out of the silence, from the west, riding hard, came Father, with a pistol in his hand.

Two things then happened together. Father rode past us, glancing into the carriage as he went by, and onto the middle of the bridge, just as a large cart piled with barrels appeared, lumbering faster and faster down the slope towards the crowd. The people and the troopers parted, the cart rumbled onto

the bridge, and there on top of the barrels, dancing and waving a torch wildly over his head was Jesus.

Through the carriage window I could see the torch swinging, swinging, and I could hear Jesus screeching at Father. Father raised his pistol and Jesus dived down into the cart, still holding the torch - and then I remember no more.

Mr Rivera let go the dash, exhaled long and slow, let himself sink back into the seat and then he did look directly at me.

"Don, you see, two of the barrels were full of black powder that Jesus had got somehow from the warehouse in the east of town. The others held kerosene or wax. When Jesus dropped to the floor of the cart – well you can imagine," and he smiled tightly. "The explosion took my Father and the bridge, as well as Jesus and his cart. They never found Jesus' body, but my father was found, twenty five metres below, in the middle of the old Casteña bridge. Mother, Guada and I left for the coast next day. Though Mother returned briefly to make arrangements for Father to be brought down and buried in Barranquilla, I never went back to Palenque."

I had no idea of how or where to start after that, and he didn't seem to need any talk, so I just turned the ignition, backed the car out of the parking space and pulled out onto the road.

When we got to the Marlborough, he just said, "Thank you Don. It helped me to have thought and said my story; it has been a very long time I have waited for that."

And before I could get my door open to go around to help him, he was out and striding into the lobby.

Across the Water

Hearing about Mr Rivera's time as a boy had got to me. Didn't know where or why, but something felt a bit, well, dislodged. It was a hell of a story, and I started thinking about the way he'd been driven, pushed hard through the rest of his life by a long dead father and an old maid, so that all he'd ever done had been configured by what happened back there around that gorge. Judging by the way he was now, he'd made peace with that past, settled his score with the ghoulish dancing gatekeeper who destroyed his father and his beloved bridge. For a man with such a shattered early life, Mr Rivera had reconstructed himself beautifully, so all the parts fitted and moved smoothly together.

Dad went when I was just short of ten, and that hit me hard, but I didn't have to see him flying through the air slowly disintegrating, or have to pick up my life in a strange town with almost nothing. I haven't got the excuse of a gorge cut through my life, and I suppose I haven't quite got all my pieces moving together so smoothly yet. But, my world is one that faces the sea, is cleaned out twice a day, revived and washed through by the tide, day in day out. Nothing holds for too long before the sand's swept clear; suits me that way for now.

From the Marlborough, I pulled out of the marina zone, away from all the flats and white plastic yachts, down to what felt like the only remaining corner of the old Swansea docks on this side of the river, the café by the old wooden landing stage just outside the south dock basin. I radioed Sheena, told

her I was having a bit of a stop, pulled the car up on a scrubby patch of grass where the road ended by the jetty head, walked over the cobbles, and ordered a tea and a bacon butty. Dennis makes one of the best bacon butties in town, though there are a good few contenders for that crown, mind. His tea is another matter. It comes in huge chipped mugs, originally white, but now heavily discoloured on the inside from a thousand teas and outside from a couple of thousand oily, fishy hands. Two types of tea Dennis provides: there's 'thoughtful' and there's 'restful'. The thoughtful variety is so strong you can smell the tannin over the bacon or sausage or whatever else you have with it; it's the colour of oxtail soup and it's gained the tag thoughtful because it kicks your mind into gear so hard you can't stop thinking about stuff – any old stuff, for about three hours. The restful is made from the same tea, but half the brew is condensed milk. The only thing you can do after a large one of those is to have a bit of a lie down. Anyone ordering cappuccino or latte is likely to end up in the river.

It was bright, with no winter chill yet, so I had my thoughtful and butty outside on one of the benches overlooking the river. I love the desolation of the place, and its resistance to time. I've been there when the tide's been right in, right out, and all stages between, but it always seems to have the same exposed, desolate feel. The jetty itself was built about a hundred years ago, and it still stands hard and steady, a good forty feet out of the grey river mud. Made from huge latticed timbers, the colour ranges from iron-grey at the top, down through a bright green weed-dressed strip at the mid-water mark, to the barnacle and mussel-crust bottom that you can only see when the water is

sucked back away from the supports for a couple of hours at the very lowest tides. Then, you can see that the mud dips down a foot or so around each massive leg, as if the whole thing had only just trod in the mud.

When I was little, Dad went through a bit of a fishing phase. He got a rod, and a big red plastic box full of little compartments for lines, hooks and floats and other bits and pieces he never used, and we used to come up here on what were nearly always wet Saturday afternoons across the winter when I was seven. Probably only about five or six times, if I think carefully, but they've stayed in my head. I don't think we ever caught much, and certainly nothing that Mam would've been able to cook, but the place made a mark on me.

When Dad was waiting for something to bite, I'd look down between the planks – I'd even lie on my belly and press my eye to a gap on the few dry days we went down there, and I'd focus on a bit of weed or a bolt in the wood, and count the number of times it went under, then came back up out of the water. I think the size of the timbers, the drop to the water, and the constantly cool feel of the place frightened me, but I had to look. Sometimes, with Dad holding the back of my parka – never to tell Mam, mind, I'd lean out over the side and feel a shiver as the water heaved itself slowly up and down against the bottom of the pier legs way below.

The jetty's always been used by half a dozen or so small inshore boats who'll be out in the bay before dawn, but back by lunchtime to haul plastic tubs of dabs and whiting, huss, and perhaps the odd cod, up the side of the jetty. And, that's quite a job. Even as a little boy, I couldn't work out why they wanted to moor the boats here, and have to climb up and down these vertical,

slimy ladders every time they went out. But, I'm glad they did, because I could watch them bringing in the catch and shaking out the nets while Dad fished and when I'd scared myself enough looking down through the planks. And, I'm glad they're still mooring up here. The far end of the walkway is chained off now because the deck planking's a bit uneven, so the fishermen seem to have given up dangling their lines off the place and left it to the mud and the boats.

Dennis's tea had its effect, and I was too itchy to sit still for long. I opened the car up, and I could hear from the radio burble that things were quiet, so Sheena'd be all right for a bit longer without me. She'd manage anyway, as she always did. Never a fuss, not a note of panic or impatience from Sheena, even when she was working twenty-five cabs on a soaking Saturday night or a freezing New Year 's Eve. I turned the radio off, locked up the car and set myself for a little wander about, up the edge of the river and into the south dock.

The dock's become the centre of the marina now, and was the first part to be finished. By the turn of the 1970s, the north and south docks, both on the Mumbles side of the river, had become more or less disused and the whole dock area was on the bones of its arse. By the mid-seventies, both north and south were filled in and most of the cargo sheds, engine and pump houses were torn down, and the rail lines ripped up. The big cranes that used to rumble up and down the keys were tipped off their rails and cut up where they lay.

But, when the marina craze struck in other towns and a bit of regeneration money seeped down the pipeline, the council got the bulldozers

and diggers back to burrow their way down, until all the hard-core and soil was clawed up from the south dock and trucked back to wherever it had come from. It's a beautiful sight in some of the photos from that time, the dock, empty and dry, all the millions of dark brown hard-fired bricks still sitting so evenly to form the dock walls, straight as a die and smooth as a mint. I found it reassuring somehow that they brick the underneath, seal it up. I'm not sure what I ever thought was down under the brown water, but I'd not thought of the docks as very big swimming pools before. Maybe they could do one with a picture of a dragon in red bricks across the bottom, just like old Tom's pool in California. Now, the south dock is called the marina, sits at the heart of the maritime quarter, and is full of water again as it should be, but this time it's home for white plastic boats, instead of grubby old tugs and steamers. For the poor old north dock, there was no dig-out and re-fill, just a load of tarmacking over and the birth of a retail park. ToysR... anywhere there's space and financial incentives.

The marina's still flanked on one side by the great dark bulk of a cargo shed, not because of a spot of genius in conservation or planning, but more I think because someone forgot or didn't allocate the money to demolish it forty years ago. This is where the national maritime museum now lives – and bloody good it is too. Not much of a fan of push-button here's-a-plasma-screen-rising-out-of-the-floor-with-a-video-of-the-National-Strike type museums, I always thought of myself as more of a Swansea-museum-dusty-things-in-glass-cases person, but they've got it right with this one. I wandered in there one day when I was walking around, like today, just for a quick look towards the end of a

drizzly afternoon; I had to be pushed out by the staff when they closed, and ended up spending my next day off in there. It does a real honest job of telling a story of how men and women sweated the coal out of the ground, sweated the copper, iron and zinc through the smelters then sweated the whole bloody lot onto ships and off, out of Wales. And, I wish Dad could've seen it. He'd have been a bit phased by the buttons and techno style, but I can picture him, edgy at first, just fiddling ever so lightly with the bottom button on his jacket like he did when he was feeling awkward, but then settling into watching all those bits of footage, smiling quietly, knowing.

Alongside the museum, to make the point that it was a dock once, we've got a lightship and an old steam tug moored up. The bright red lightship, a thing so clearly meant to be way out to sea and staying there, looks a bit out of place in the dock. It's a bit like seeing a zebra or a llama in a field full of cows. But, there it sits, the poor old thing, the bulbous lamp-tower arcing slowly, nodding first at the yachts and water glittering in the sun, then slowly leaning over at the high-tech maritime museum nestling in its old cargo-shed clothing. Somewhere on board the lightship a bell donged with each slow tilt.

I can remember the sound of the bell on the warning buoy out on the Mixen sandbank just off Mumbles headland when I was a little. On a day when there was just a light breeze, you'd hear it so clearly all over Mumbles, even though the sandbank is out round the head of the bay, a good mile away. That sound, together with the fog horn sounding out on the lighthouse island, and the maroons they used to fire up to call out the lifeboat crew, they have always

stood in my mind as the background track for the place and its relationship with the sea.

Mam and Dad always used to sit up when the maroons went off, booming out over Mumbles, on nights when the wind was screeching and the rain was coming down in sheets. Don't think I ever heard them go off in the day, or at any other time really, than when we were sitting in front of the big old telly with the curtains closed against some howling bloody night.

Dad would look at mam, and he'd always say:

"There we are... someone's in trouble... Those boys are out then, out on a night when all you want to be is in here."

And, though he wasn't religious at all beyond putting me through Sunday school and turning up for my confirmation in his best mac and only suit, not for faith but because that's what you did, he'd always say,

"God in Heaven look after those boys tonight," and look gravely at Mam.

And Mam would nod slowly and knowingly.

I wasn't ever sure what to do when they did that. It was a bit like when they said prayers in school or in cubs; I'd just let my face sag, in a way that I thought made me look like the prime minister on the telly on Armistice Day. And then I'd gaze at a point just a foot or so below the floor and think about tea, or the next Airfix model I was going to get.

But, the RNLI use pagers now because they're worried about the rockets falling down on people, and the fog horn's got a different, electronic noise instead of the deep air-blast that used to boom around the whole bay. And, I

bet they both work better, but they play havoc with my mental pictures. The bell's still out there on the Mixen though.

I went fishing out over the Mixen, off a boat, only just a couple of months ago. It was the first time I'd been near a fishing rod since those days with Dad down at the jetty. Haydn Baines keeps a twenty-one footer moored off Knab Rock in the village, and he'd nagged me for years to go out with him. Every time we had a pint in the Founders he'd end up telling about how he and some of the boys were off early on Saturday, or next week, or some bloody day, out to catch something wonderful in the bay.

"Come on then Don. Why don't you come and have a dangle eh?"

And, always I'd have work, or something on, or some reason not to bother, and he'd chivvy for a couple of minutes, and then we'd have another pint and someone would arrive or somebody'd leave, and it'd be forgotten. But, without fail, the next time we'd sit over in the back corner smacking our lips after the first sip of the Brains SA, he'd tack back into it.

"Now Don, this Sunday, half past eight, down at the slip. No need for a rod, or anything mun. Just bring a couple of sandwiches and be there, eh?"

And so it went, and for some reason, one Friday night, I remember, it was not long after Gramps went, I gave up with the excuses and said okay. Haydn was amazed, genuinely pleased as punch, which touched me a bit, and we had a good few pints on the strength of it.

Like he'd said, two days later, there we were at the slip, five of us in the grey November morning, Mumbles empty, sprawled out a bit ungainly and

unwashed after the Saturday night. All the boys had big professional-looking yellow wellies on, and they carried rods and bags and nets and wire baskets, and Tim Wheland had on a huge tool belt with pliers and cutters and a knife and a pair of leather gloves all in little holders. But then, he was always a showy bastard. I had a little army knapsack with four rounds of corned beef and mustard, a thermos of black coffee, a nice green apple, and a carrot that I'd found in the fridge.

Out past the Roads, just beyond the lighthouse island, the sea picked up, and as we went over the cherrystone rocks there were waves coming from all angles. Haydn had no worries and just kept up a running commentary on what we'd catch, what we'd get first, the type of bait that would be best, who'd pull in a big one, and all the other fisherman talk, so I kept by him in the cover of the wheelhouse and had a corned beef butty.

Over the Mixen bank, Haydn dropped a long anchor and we rode, part tethered, part free with the swell. I knew the bank was a big thing under the water, because like all Mumbles folk I'd watched from the café and cliffs around Limeslade and Bracelet bays as huge winter swells raced over the place – and of course, the bank had taken down a good half dozen ships over the years.

Although I'd seen the swells from up on the cliffs, I hadn't realised just what it would feel like out there. The boat was rising up, slowly and slightly askew, a little on a tilt to port, then for a gut-whooping moment we'd hang high above the sea, before dropping a good twenty feet into a trough. I tried to keep my eyes off it, but I could see the water brighten, even glow a pale green colour, right at the bottom of the troughs, and I swear I could smell the sands

twenty feet below the surface. I always expected water to get darker as you looked down – not inviting, but there's certainty in that; to see a light coming up from beneath, though, that was unsettling.

The other boys already had lines out, but I couldn't let go of the wheelhouse wall. And this was a calm day with almost no wind.

Haydn looked and laughed.

"It's arright Don, honest. The sand's well covered; we won't go aground," and he handed me a rod.

Then to make me feel even better, he said

"The sands rise from the bottom, see, about a hundred feet on the seaward side, almost sheer, but they slope off gently this side. That's what kicks the waves up, see. Beautiful sands they are, white and clean. Like bones!" and he winked.

We spent nearly an hour out there, and the boys did catch some big dogfish and even a couple of fair sized wrasse. They mucked about, and waggled the fish at me and weighed them and took pictures, but I didn't really get to grips with it. I couldn't get my eyes off that pale green luminous smudge beneath us as the boat dropped between the swells.

When Haydn finally pulled anchor and we toddled off inside the bay, I felt good enough to eat the rest of my grub. In the calmer waters, I dangled a line or two, and even got a couple of dabs that would've provided a reasonable lunch for a small kitten.

At three, we headed in, a bit cold and all triumphant from our battle with the elements. We moored up, paddled in, cleaned off, packed kit away, and re-

grouped in the Founders. When I left at ten-thirty I felt like a proper sailor. Easy, this fishing lark.

It was getting late. I gave Sheena a call from my mobile outside the maritime museum, and signed off for the rest of the day. I just felt like a bit more wandering. Back on in the morning at six, I'd take the car home and hack straight in for first jobs at the station. I'd have been off at six this evening anyway, and things were dead, so I wasn't losing a lot. Sheena was happy, said I'd only be hanging about around her feet if I went back to the base.

So, free for the rest of the afternoon, I tracked my way back around the marina and out onto the sand dunes where the maritime quarter flats met the seafront. I thought I could wander along the sand and then up past the west pier edge and back up to the car at the jetty. By that time, Dennis's tea might have worn off.

Down on the beach, the light was beginning to fade. It was greying, and over in the east the clouds were dark. I probably had an hour, maybe an hour and a half before it got gloomy – plenty of time for me to get back to the car and into the traffic home. The tide was up and I walked along the water's edge, slinging the odd stone into the little waves that ran up towards me, and kicking at the little bits of smelter slag that have been washed down the river over the centuries and pepper this bit of the bay even now. Usually, I walked on the beach at Mumbles or down at that end of the bay. It was rare for me to be on the sand right up by the river. It was good to see Mumbles from this angle, and

good, too, to catch the heavier, oily, industrial smells of the river, the docks, and the works over at Port Talbot. As I walked, I watched two huge plumes of steam rising from Port Talbot, where they must have been running new steel through the coolers. Like rising bile, I had a burning in my throat, and a hard knot in my gut, as I stood and watched the works over there.

Dad. He'd had spent his whole working life there, pinned down on a rolling three shift pattern, six till two, two till ten, ten till six. I only really saw him when he was on six till twos, when he'd get home about the same time I got home from school. He'd have had a shower at the plant, but he still reeked of something, a hard sweat and metal smell, when he hugged me goodnight. The other two shifts meant he was sleeping in the day or tired or just out of synch with my life. Mam seemed to stretch around my school hours and his shifts, so she was up all hours making tea, cutting sandwiches, washing and drying, her night's sleep broken into small pieces and tucked into corners of the clock. At weekends Dad was off, but Saturday and Sunday were often prey to the last or next shift he was on. He always seemed to be a tired man, either getting up or just going to bed, or coming home with just enough energy to sit and smile placidly at me, Mam or the telly. Sometimes I'd wake up when he was getting ready to leave on an early, and peek out of the bedroom window to watch him go, a man in a donkey jacket, leaving home in the dark, cranking our old car up then driving down the road and out of sight, on through town and round to Port Talbot to do eight hours in the belting heat of the plant.

But even though he was so often asleep or at the plant, I could look over the bay and see where he was. I liked that. Any day there'd be the thick steam

plumes to show me where Dad was busy, and sometimes at night when they tapped the furnaces, instead of the normal twinkle of the plant across the bay, the sky would catch fire. An orangey wave would surge out from the ground over the other side of the bay and slowly climb across the horizon. The clouds went dark red first, then the fire would seem to leap up and grip the sky, and light the whole bay red and orange. It's a hell of a sight, even now. The colour used to terrify me back then, but would make me proud of the old man at the same time. I knew Dad was in there somewhere, and I used to have a vague idea that he was there in his white plastic hard-hat that he always had on the back seat of the car, turning a great big wheel to make the bubbling cauldron of iron point at the sky. It was like his way of waving goodnight to Mam and me.

When I was nine and a half, the flames went out and he died. In those days, you heard adults talking a lot about people, usually men, who had "dropped down dead". Two or three of Mam and Dad's friends, and quite a few of our neighbours just stopped being there, and we children overheard the conversations at the shops, at school gates, on buses, about so-and-so who'd "dropped down dead". Heart attacks, thromboses, liver disease, smoking relating cardiac arrest, undiagnosed cancers and a hundred and one industrial diseases, all unknown, beyond the wits of the system to describe or treat. All leading to the dropping down dead of men like my Dad. On a crisp December morning at five o'clock, he shivered his way into his work clothes, snatched a quick cuppa and a bit of toast with Mam, scraped the car clear of frost and set off for work, and never came home.

The headmistress, Miss Gerald came and got me from our classroom just after milk break, and said I was to go with Mrs Todd from next door, and that Mam would see me at the hospital, and that Dad had been taken a bit poorly and that it would be all right and that I should be a good boy for my Mam. And all the way up to the hospital, I thought he would be sitting in bed in his blue pyjamas, perhaps drinking tomato soup, with a little glass of Lucozade on the side cabinet, like I did when I was ill. But he was dead. And Mam was crying, and Mrs Gerald tried to explain, but I wouldn't listen and when she tried to hug me I pushed her away and ran down the long sloping corridor that ran between the wards, running away from the hug I didn't want, away, just away. And further down, when they were far enough away and I couldn't hear the crying and their voices so loud, I stopped. And I stood right in the middle of the corridor and the world seemed to spin, so I put out both my arms, feeling the whole corridor, and the hospital spinning round and round. And I was standing there like that when Gramps came puffing up the corridor and found me. He didn't say anything, he just took one of my hands, and stretched out his arm to touch the wall, and then he slowly, ever so slowly, reeled me in, gently bringing me out of that spinning place and up against the cool painted brick wall. And he held me gently, and never said a word. And from then on we were linked, paired, in the inarticulacy of our grief. He sat with me the day of Dad's funeral, when the house was full of grown-ups and no-one knew what to say, so he said nothing. And I sat with him when Mam went, and I didn't know what to say, so we neither of us said a thing.

Recount

It was the day of the Mumbles carnival and raft race, and I always took the day off for the raft race. Years ago, the day off had been purely about enjoyment, nowadays it was enjoyment plus practicality; I couldn't get my car out of or back into the village very easily, and since most of the place grinds to a halt on carnival day anyway, I figured why struggle against the tide, just join the fun.

Two years running, I'd been talked into taking part in the race by some of the boys at the rugby club and, another year, by some of the lads at the Founders. There wasn't a lot to tell the experiences apart because the basic ingredients were the same: all three rafts involved a mixed load of plastic and steel oil drums, some planks likely as not borrowed from a quiet building site, a big pirate flag on a long whippy stick, and some paddles that were made from plastic dustpans nailed to short poles. And always enough beer to float the raft.

We came second when I was on the raft for the Founders, and the four of us were heroes for at least an hour and a half, till everyone was too drunk to remember what they were celebrating. The two years I crewed for the rugby club were a bit less glorious, as we failed to get to the finish. This isn't as bad as it sounds, because most years a good few of the teams don't make it anywhere near the finish and a fair number find it difficult even to stay afloat till the starting gun goes. Nobody minds, and most people prefer watching a maritime disaster unfold to a smooth efficient boat-race. It's not so much about racing, it's about providing a spectacle, something the crowds can laugh and

point at. Everyone from Mumbles and half the folk from town swarm onto the prom and pack along the sea wall from West Cross to Southend, cheering, shouting, laughing, and waiting to see which rafts would break up or sink first. It's not the winning, that matters, see, but the falling apart.

The first rugby club year, I was with Dan Hollis, Clive Sheppard, Barry Nelson and Chris Friar. Dan was a winger, a bit serious, fast, wiry, and not frightened of anything; Clive was huge, a prop forward, and not given to chatting much – a bit like having a moose along; Barry was one of those blokes who seems to know almost everyone, who almost everyone loves, and who absolutely everyone recognises as a head-case; Chris was a born volunteer and helper: cubs, scouts, rugby training for the under 14s, charity runs and fancy dress walks, he was involved in them all. And there was me, a lot less fit than the others, less involved in the big events of the village, but up for a bit of fun and happy to do a bit to raise some dosh for heart research. Dad had gone with a heart attack, so for me it seemed right to say yes when the lads asked me.

Chris was the driving force, organising meetings, suggesting designs, drawing up lists of required materials and kit from day one. Barry put himself in charge of finding the stuff for building the raft, and we didn't ever ask where from, Dan usually did the measuring, and nailing and tying, and Clive and me did most of the carrying and holding and fetching. It worked, more or less. The raft took shape over six Wednesday evenings down the yard at the back of the club, and eventually, we were ready to try her out.

It was a big beast of a thing, with two outriggers like those canoes they have in the Pacific islands, and a main deck between them, that was raised up

about three feet and had a square platform built from an old forklift pallet. Chris had planned it so that me, Barry, Clive and Dan would sit on the outriggers either side and paddle like buggery while he'd stomp about up on the platform, beating the top of an old steel oil drum that we'd sawn off and fixed on legs. A bit like one of the dragon boats in Hong Kong - or an old Roman slave galley.

The first obstacle was getting her down to the water, because with all the timber and plastic the thing was way too heavy to carry, even with Clive amongst us. So, Chris went off for twenty minutes and came back with someone who'd take the raft down to the slipway for us using the rowing club's van and trailer. This was good of them given that the rowing club were entering their own raft, but then Chris always managed to pull off that sort of thing.

Down at the slip for our first sea trials, the tide was up, the bay was calm as a pond, and it was a beautiful June evening. Lots of people were out wandering up and down the prom, so we gathered quite a crowd, and the whole thing turned into a bit of an event. People stopped and ate their chips watching us, and a big group brought their beers out of the George to watch. Chris found a couple of spare buckets from somewhere, and we managed to collect thirty-five quid right there and then, before we'd even uncoupled the trailer.

As we dragged the raft into the water, the crowd first made encouraging noises, then fell about. Fair enough, they had a point; it did float, and it drifted very slowly away from the slip, but the only part that was actually visible was Chris' platform and his oil drum. Buoyancy - clearly a bit more tricky than we'd

thought. Under its own weight, the raft had settled itself with the outriggers two feet under the water, and that was even before we got aboard.

"It's a cowin' U-boat," came the verdict from up on the sea wall.

"Nah, it's the Cockleshell Heroes..."

"Up periscope..."

And a lot more falling about.

Even when Clive got underneath and tried to lift the thing up, he couldn't get it any nearer the surface. Well, we couldn't cross the bay like that, paddling above our heads, so it was a slow embarrassing tug-and-heave to get the bloody thing back up the slipway and onto the trailer. All done while the crowd hummed the theme from *Hawaii Five-0*.

Chris spent the next hour back at the club doing some complex calculations and adjusting his design, while the rest of us had a few pints. Eventually he came over to the table, triumphant:

"I've got it now boys, problem solved. We can achieve maximum buoyancy and optimum lift see, just by shifting the design characteristics," and he produced a beery sheet of A4 with a biro drawing on.

"It's the same. Twat," Clive said. That was pretty much the greatest number of words in a row that you ever get from Clive, so feelings were obviously running high.

"No," Chris said. "That's the beauty of the redesign, see – it looks the same but it's not. That's physics that is."

Clive went to the bar.

"What we've got is additional buoyancy. Here and here!" Chris gestured proudly at the two extra oil drums he'd drawn on to each of the outriggers.

"Twat," said Clive from the bar.

It did float, and we had some good practice runs on her, paddling about the bay while Chris perfected his drumming. It was hard work, getting her moving, but once there was a bit of forward motion, and we'd dropped into the rhythm of the drum, we did make some headway. Optimism was setting in.

On the day of the race we got her into the water good and early, and we were just about to head for the starting buoy, when Barry told us to heave to the slipway again.

"Just two minutes, boys, and I'll be back," he said as he leapt from the raft and waded out. The crowd parted around him and he went over to his car. Sure enough, two minutes later he started wading back in, but now carrying a great big plastic crate, which he half-floated, half carried out to the raft.

"Up on your platform, Chris. It's our star turn," and he whipped the top off the box. Inside was a yellow flashing light, like breakdown trucks have on their roofs. Attached to the lamp were a string of wires, and a great big truck battery.

"Just press the button when we start, and we'll light up the bay. The others'll be so amazed, we'll snatch the race no problems," and he heaved the box up to Chris then clambered back onto his outrigger.

Well off we went and Chris fired up the light and got the drum pounding. We dug deep with the paddles, and began to make our way through

the field. Eventually, we even began to draw away from the others. As we got further out into the bay, and as we really got some speed up, with the choppy water, there were great surges of spray coming off the fronts of the outriggers. It must've looked great from the prom, the drum booming, the spray lashing up, the yellow light flashing out almost in time to the strokes.

And then Chris lost his rhythm and started to dance about wildly. And, a thick trail of grey smoke started to pour over the edge of the plastic crate.

Chris suddenly ripped off his tee shirt and started rubbing it over his legs, lurching from side to side of the platform. Then he jumped, straight over the side, yelling, flailing his arms. We didn't know what the hell to do, but we were three quarters of the way by now, so when Chris re-surfaced, we just kept on paddling, hard as before. The grey smoke oozed itself across the platform and down towards Clive and Barry's side of the raft. Within seconds, Clive was gagging, waving his paddle around in front of his face, his eyes screwed shut.

"Moke!" he croaked, and dropped off the outrigger into the sea, to be joined a second later by Barry.

With the sudden loss of the others, the balance shifted so dramatically that our float was now a good foot under water. Dan looked around and started to swear, when the cloud now got to us. Acrid, blinding, burning our eyes and skin. We followed Barry and Clive.

The group of us gathered, treading water at a safe distance from the raft, which by now was invisible, cloaked in a huge grey cloud, through which a dim orangey light pulsed.

"The battery! That cowin' battery! It's leaking bloody acid and making some sort of gas with all the spray... My legs are burned to buggery," puffed Chris.

"Twat, Barry," was Clive's take, as he turned and began to head for the beach.

The race had to be stopped while the inshore lifeboat boys got a rope around our raft and towed it out of the way. They beached her down by Knab Rock and the fire brigade got one of their lads on board in a breather to get the battery out and sealed. We got a bit of grief from the committee and the other crews that night. But, we still nearly won.

So, I had a bit of a history with the Mumbles raft race. None of the other years had been so memorable, but they'd all had their moments. And now, I'd retired, become a spectator.

I'd rung Andrea during the week before the race and asked her if she fancied watching. We spent nearly an hour yapping on the phone like a pair of teenagers. She was up to her eyes in revision for her finals, but had done all she felt she could that week, and needed a break, and she hadn't ever seen the race, so it was a date. I was pleased that she was still keen; felt a bit of a surge, to be honest.

We met up in the Founders, which was heaving. I stood by the door and caught her as she got there, handed her the drink I'd already bought for her, and we wedged ourselves into a corner behind the door. It was good to see her and, while we stood there shouting pleasantries above the racket, I was surprised by how pleased I felt.

"Dear God, Don, is it always like this?" she yelled. "It's worse than a weekend at Wind Street."

"Ah, they haven't really started yet – just wait till after the carnival," I said grinning. "But, if the crowd wasn't so thick, more people would fall over. So, it's a kind of health and safety thing, everyone gets pissed and everyone can lean on each other in complete safety," and I draped myself drunkenly on her shoulders. She giggled and leant into me. I suddenly felt charged, hungry for her again. She sensed the moment and turned her face up to kiss me, and we were lost for a few minutes, isolated from the whole surging crowd.

After we'd gotten familiar again, then disentangled and had a drink, she said

"Don, do you mind if we try to find somewhere a bit quieter? I don't feel too great in these big crowds. Can we head down to the beach before everyone gets out on the street?"

I didn't mind, because I'd seen it all before, and I didn't want to get too wrapped up in the usual crowd from the pub or the rugby club; odd, but I quite wanted to dive off with Andrea and have a more peaceful time. So, we finished our drinks and headed down to the prom. Crowds were beginning to gather for the carnival, with little groups forming around lampposts, on grassy banks and

behind railings. It was as if the flow of pedestrians was becoming snagged on obstacles, slowly building up a series of little jams, which would eventually clog and shut down movement on the pavements. We threaded our way through these little gatherings, and made the prom fairly easily. It was still clear, as most people watch the carnival then surge across the roads, and head for the prom after it's gone by

The tide was still coming in, with around twenty yards to go before it would start to climb up the sloping sea wall. That wouldn't take long, because the bay is so shallow that you can watch the carpet of water coming further and further in with each wave. And with each wave the bay just got more and more beautiful on a summer's day, the water all calm and silvery, the sky a clear blue, and a bit of body given by the grey and green of Mumbles Head behind. It was a bit different on a howling winter's day, but still beautiful even then.

We started to drift along the prom towards Norton and West Cross, away from Mumbles, just chatting and joking. I gave Andrea a quick run through my previous on the race, and she was tickled.

"You blokes," she said, slapping my arm. "It's amazing that anything serious ever happens in Mumbles at all. But, it's a lovely place."

She paused, and turned out towards the water back over to Mumbles, squinting against the sunlight. "I wish I'd lived down in Mumbles really. I think it would've been more fun than the boring old Uplands. And, I might've met you before now," she squeezed my arm and gave a little laugh. "But, it's easy for the uni where I am, and all my mates come from cities not the coast, so it

didn't seem important to them to be down on the bay – they wanted to be nearer town really. I s'pose Uplands is a compromise that suits us all."

We talked about her friends, the close ones, the ones she lived with. Her Julie from Birmingham was loaded and often spent a hundred pounds on clothes and was going home to run her parents' gym and bar, and Pia from Cardiff who had no money at all and had to work pretty much full-time in the White Rose in town and at Burger King, and who was doing eco-science or sustainable development, and who wanted to run a project back in Uganda, where her folks came from in the 70s but she'd never been to. And there was Daniel from Southampton who was doing English, but hardly ever seemed to read a book and wanted to be a professional poker player, and a whole bunch of others whose names and backgrounds drifted by me a little.

Pia was Andrea's real mate, and they'd stuck together since they'd arrived in Swansea.

"We're quite different, see Don, but we share a lot, things we care about, core stuff, and that's what makes us friends. Her family have lived on two continents, been kicked about all over the place, had a real struggle for life, and she hasn't got a bloody bean in the world, but all she wants to do is put something back. Me, I've only ever lived in bloody Aberdare."

We'd wandered a long way up the prom by now, past West Cross, and were almost at Blackpill.

"Hey Don, let's keep walking eh? Let's walk up to town?"

"What about the race?"

"Truth? Not bothered really. We can see it from the prom as we walk if we want to. It's such a nice afternoon that I just feel like getting away from everyone a bit, having a chance to roam about, like. Do you mind?" and she pulled me to her.

"No, no, I don't, at all. I've been in it, seen it, and I've actually got the tee-shirt – three of them!"

So, we kissed, laughed a bit and carried on. We talked easily, made little jokes and rambled around different subjects. I liked being with her, and I realised that this was the first real date I'd been on for years. Other times, well, they were just pick-ups or morning-afters, which aren't so real. Once the sex is done, there's often nothing to them at all, no real contact between people. But, this was good and I was enjoying it.

We did watch the race, from the sand-dunes opposite the university, so we were seeing the thing from a bit of an odd angle. But, it didn't matter to me, I was used to seeing the world from funny angles - backwards in a mirror was how I saw half the world anyway. Don't know who won the race, and didn't really care, it would probably have been much the same as last year, or the year before.

As we passed the Marlborough, I told Andrea a bit about Mr Rivera, about his life as a boy in Colombia, about his search for a house to die in.

"Funny isn't it," Andrea said, stopping to pick up a piece of bleached, smooth driftwood, "most people talk about a house to live in, and here's him doing just the opposite. I hope I can be like that when I'm older Don – you know, in control, measured and calm about it."

And I realised that I'd never even thought about my own death like that, as something I could control or manage. Yes, I'd had thoughts about Dad and his death, but I suppose that had fixed my view, that death happens to you, when you don't expect or want it. I'd thought the same way about it since Mam got ill, and since she'd gone too, but never about me as an old man, or even as an older man; I hadn't ever seen that the road went that far.

"I'm in the 'rage against the dying of the light' club, me." I said. "I don't intend to go quietly – and I wasn't thinking of going at all just yet!"

I took her hand and gently set her moving again, away from the conversation and the hotel. But I was thinking now, about the road, and where it led. She could sense something, and she fell silent for a bit, just walked, occasionally kicking a shell or pebble across the sand. And then, looking up at me sideways, she asked, ever so gently,

"What d'you think you'll do Don? I mean in the future, years to come? You're not going to carry on like you are, are you?"

"Well, I've not decided yet... It depends on things, on what happens and stuff..." and as I said it I could hear the hollowness booming around inside the words.

"That's bollocks really isn't it? You know there's nothing to stop you doing anything you want, nothing at all. You could go back to uni, finish that degree."

"That degree! You must be joking. I wouldn't go back to that degree even if I was paid to do it. Quantity surveying - I hated it. Not only the degree really, but the people, the place, all wrong. I didn't fit in at all, not at all. No,

that's not one of the things I'll be doing. Don't know why I applied for it really, had no bloody interest in it, and the place didn't appeal."

"Something must've taken your fancy though Don?" she sat down, obviously intent on having this conversation.

"Well, I think it was a bit of a reaction really, to Dad's death. No, that's not quite right. It was a reaction to his life. He'd worked so bloody hard all his life and never got a damn thing. He turned up at work in the same blue overalls, parked his cheap car in the same car park and spent eight hours a day in the same plant, for nearly twenty years." I gestured across the bay, at the hazy mass of the steelworks, where a tower of grey steam rose into the blue sky.

"For most of my childhood, he either got up while I was in bed or came home while I was in bed, or he was in bed while I was up. When - well, when he died, I think Mam was determined that I shouldn't go down the same route, and I picked up that thinking. So, she made sure I worked hard enough, so I could get to college. But, we didn't know anything about what I could do really, hadn't a clue, either of us. I chose quantity surveying because Dad had talked about surveyors coming into the works when they built the new rolling mills, and they seemed to be blokes in suits who turned up, did something important, then went off back to an office somewhere. When I was eleven, that seemed like a big job, compared to what Dad did – it just stuck with me."

She stroked the back of my hand as I talked, smiling softly.

"You and me both Don," she said. "I didn't have a clue what I could do when I was at school – except all the teachers assumed we'd be nurses or

secretaries, or work for the local Co-op.” She squeezed my hand and turned my face to hers

“Don, I’m sorry, I need to tell you. As soon as the finals end next summer, I’m going away for a year with Pia, travelling,” and she squeezed my hand again hard, to stop me talking, to stop me saying something like it didn’t matter, good luck, great.

She carried on:

“I have never been away anywhere but France, twice, and don’t know a bloody thing about the world. I need to go and see what’s out there, or I’ll never forgive myself. I’m sorry Don, I know we’re just getting going and everything, and it is lovely, and I wish this wasn’t happening now, but we’ve been planning for nearly a year, and I do need to... I have to go, otherwise I’m scared I’ll get... stuck...” she tailed off, and put her head on my shoulder.

“Like me,” I said.

“I didn’t say that Don,” she snapped, with surprising force.

“No, I did.” I leant my face down on the top of her head. “You’ve got to go, and you’d be a bloody fool to even think about changing anything. We, this, us , we’re lovely, but you need to do what you’ve planned, or you’ll never forgive yourself.”

And we sat there watching the waves until they were just beginning to drop down the beach again.

Andrea jumped up suddenly and grabbed both my hands. “Don, let’s make this evening special. Let’s stay in a hotel tonight, here in town. Go on.

I've got some money because I haven't been out for ages, and it'll be horrible back down in Mumbles tonight. Shall we?" She waggled my hands and pulled me up, into her arms, holding my hands behind my back, her face turned up close to mine. "Come on..."

"Alright. But, a proper hotel, not some shaggers' guest house? Somewhere nice? The Dragon? And, we check in now, not later, okay?"

I'd taken too many couples to too many crummy places late at night to be doing that with Andrea. We weren't full of tequila shots, she didn't have a wedding ring hidden away in the change pocket of her jeans and I didn't have a wallet full of condoms. And we knew each other's names. So, we could do this properly, be proper.

We had a laugh buying a cheap holdall in the market, then a pair of toothbrushes, some toiletries, and a cheap wrap for her to wear when the sun had dropped. The sweatshirt I had draped over my shoulders would do for me. In two hours, we'd checked into the Dragon, showered, set out our few things in the fourth floor room overlooking the Kingsway, and were sipping wine in the hotel bar. I'd picked up or dropped off here a hundred times, yet I'd never stayed and never even had a drink in the bar. It's a lovely hotel, solidly built at the start of the sixties, so I'd grown up with it being an island of class standing up against the sea of clubs and the chaos that washes up and down the Kingsway most nights.

A few more drinks in the bar, then into the chilled evening, getting loud now with the first shiftings from pub to pub. Me and Andrea wove a laughing path through gangs of lads, shirts still tidy, hair jelled just right, spirits still on

the rise. We dodged around girls in bigger gangs, louder, lewder, laughter embracing the daftness of it all, in click-clack heels, skirts like belts and makeup still holding fast this early. All the fun of a Saturday night before the money gets tight, the friends disappear and the doubts creep in. Plenty of coppers too, sitting, patient in minibuses and vans, knowing there's no need to move, that it'll all come to them before the night is out.

We ate in a Spanish place I'd been to before, wooden floors, dim lighting, lots of dusty bottles and boxes scattered about on rustic shelving, sawdust on the floor, and good seafood all there on ice for you to choose. It wasn't Spanish at all, in truth, but the dream come true for a local boy from the Hafod who'd done well with a café up by the station in the seventies, been on a lot of holidays to Tossa del Mar, and wanted to bring something back with him. He jumped on a cheap loan in the early seventies, bought out an old Timothy White's store, hired a chef from Cardiff called Ryan, and never looked back.

Something about the evening made a difference, and we both ordered on the exotic side, with plenty of wine. We talked and chomped till the staff were sweeping the sawdust down the room, and the ice had melted. And then more wine back at the hotel.

Two hours later, she dozed off, but I couldn't. So, I lay there with the lights off hearing the usual chorus of tarts and twats shrieking and growling their way through the end of a Saturday. Outside on the Kingsway. Bins going over, cars beeping, lads growling, girls shrieking and giggling. Sirens in the

background. Slow wheeling groups making their way up towards the long slope of Mount Pleasant.

And here was me and Andrea away from them, in our own private space, shut off by the double glazed window, the four floors up, the twenty-four hour reception, breathing the sanitised air that was being cleaned just for us, for our stay, to take away the smell of our love-making.

Until the next couple the next night.

Glass

The door creaked on that hinge, and in he came. I was used to some of the guys off the tankers being hefty, but Christ, he was a big feller; the whole back end dropped as he dumped himself onto the plastic covers. And, a very strong collection of smells got in with him.

Damp wool from the donkey jacket, soaking jeans. Oil somewhere, too, probably on the boots and, I bet, rubbed deep into the fingers and under the nails. And, something else, something old... something sweet, dusty, despite the rain and soaking clothes. Reminds me of the face powder women wore when I was a boy.

"Hello Drive. I want to go to St Mary's Square, please. It is near the Hanbury pub."

Fare B, and off. Engine feels the weight, but then it is the pool car. Bastards thrash it on nights.

Now, there's a voice to work on. There's definitely some Welsh in there, and he got the 'Drive' bit right, but no, not with the "Hanbury pub" bit, he's not from Wales. And he was too polite with the 'Hello'. He's trying, though. Not to be matey, but to blend in. Do as we do, as they do. To get a drink, get a lift, get in or out of a barny, get a job, get laid, get a better bunk. Probably works if you're in and out of one shitty town after another on the coasts of the Bristol Channel. Two nights in Barry with flattened vowels, one in Milford with slanted e's, up to Avonmouth and roll the r's and then all the way out around the Lizard and on to the south Cornwall coast and Plymouth, slowing it all down. Never

stops; chugging up and down the Severn, down one side and up the other. Weather's a bastard in the winter as well, all the way, either way, both ways. And no-one trusts you, because you're not from town, though a lot of them want the money you've just been handed by the ship's agent.

Landscapes and distant voices, lights on the water and grab the first accent you hear as the ropes are thrown out of the darkness and the side bumps against a jetty. Swansea, Ostend, Rotterdam, Zeebrugge, Cork, doesn't matter where. All these lads, they have to struggle inside the accents as quick as they worm their ways out of the all-weather deck suits and into the cheap jeans and shirts; for survival and protection. On the water, same as on the land, it's just about wearing the right uniform, about fitting in.

But he's got something coming through the Welshness, something that goes down to his guts. He breathed it out when he spoke, like something exhaled, not said. On the breath there's roll-ups, beer earlier and, over it all, the coppery smell from a short-haul life, the smells from all the Cape Horners, Bay Views, Schooners and Pilots, and the in-betweens in the bookies. Other people's fags and pints with 'mates' whose faces change with each door pushed open. There's a rasp that cuts the surface off the voice just as it meets the air, takes the curve off the vowels and grinds the words powdery, leaves dust in the air as well as sound. But there's something old and foreign, something polite, careful, in the sounds. Not just something that's not from round here, but something really foreign, from a place I don't know about.

So where's foreign, then? It was all breathy at the front, so it'd put him somewhere over in the east, maybe Czech, or maybe somewhere a bit more

exotic, like Romania or Hungary. There's a bloody big river in Hungary, I've seen pictures - and I've heard the music - *dee dee dee Dee-Dee, pom pom, pom pom*. Bet there's a teatowel an' all, but it was grey in the book I saw, not blue. Romania's all castles in the mountains, very Hammer house of horror, can't move for garlic and girls with big tits in trances. Never seen a river, let alone docks in any of the films, but, then, Dracula got here, didn't he? Whitby he came ashore this end, so he must've sailed from somewhere. Don't know much about the Czechs, 'cept we went up against Hitler for them. Wonder what he'd say if I told him that half the town's shitty concrete plazas and pedestrian precincts you daren't walk through at night are there 'cos we went in to save his lot? Mind, it could be Poland, with the shipyards and old Lech.

"First time in town?"

"No, I came here once before, but on that time I was not off the boat. We were unloading only one night and then to Cardiff, so I was on the deck, and my friends they all were in the clubs. Tonight, I have done my work, and the second is on deck." And he chuckled, low in his belly, a deep rumbling sound, "Ha, out in the rain. Yes, he is out, on the deck, in all this damn Welsh rain "

He obviously thought that was a good one and carried on having a bit of chuckle at it, the laughter coming right up from his boots. He tapped hard on the glass in case I didn't know where the rain was.

"Yes, out there on the deck in all the Welsh rain. . ."

A big, boomy, echoing laugh like a barrel going down steps. Tap tap, tap, ha, ha, ha.

Whack, whack, whack, on the concrete joints, squelch and babble from the radio under the dash. Sheena's a bit keen tonight, making it all sound like a busy one, like she's directing a great big fleet of cars packed with jobs, and more coming down the phone and in the door every second. Except it's a night for Noah, the streets are deserted and they're all sat by the box with the curtains shut. There's only two of us on and you could probably get all the jobs into one minibus if you tried.

Yeah, it was thin tonight. You could get them all into one minibus tonight. Except this fella, this huge barrel of a bloke with his laugh, ha ha ha. He'd need a bit more room. As we came by the fish dock, where the railway cuts over, I slowed, but the exhaust still bottomed on the crossing. Jesus, he is a size. But he got in no problem, just one big move and down, no grabbing on the front seat or hanging on the door. The old ones and the fat ones need time, have to do it in stages, breathless, arms shaking with the strain. But not him. I can remember, the door was hardly open and he was in. He banged down on the seat, but that was release, not loss of control. There wasn't a grunt, and there's always a grunt from the big ones, they can't help it.

There's a good bit of size there, but he's not breathing hard through the nose like some of the fat ones do, so he must be fit. A lot of them have power, you can see it in their arms, massive great things, straining the tee shirts and making their jackets look like they've been blown up with a pump but, then, they've nearly always got huge guts to go with it. When they get in at the start of the night, it's all arms and chest and you don't notice the guts so much, but

later on it's like the arms have had the air let out and they're breathing hard, heaving a great big gut into the back with them. But not this bloke.

He's stopped the laughing now, and I can't hear a bloody sound from him really; it's like he's all quiet, buttoned up and polite till you talk to him, set him off. So, definitely foreign then. Can't see anything of him to get an idea, just catching the smells coming off his clothes and out of his breath and that memory of the oldness in the voice. Try to get a glimpse as we get into town. But all there is is the shadow in the back soaking up each orange flash. So there we were, me taking a glimpse, and nothing there but shadow, him just occupying the space, neutral, silent – no, more *peaceful* than silent.

Then he gets out the tin and the papers. No can do. I've got a routine now: light on and point to the sign: no food, no drink, no smoking. Council policy. Not my rules; theirs. They're right on our necks – our necks, mind, honest, not just yours. The bureaucrats, all of them, matter of civic decency and public health, CCTV and licensing. Not my car. I wouldn't care if it was up to me, mate, but those are the rules and I'd get the fine. So, if it's all the same to you...

Usually works, cos it brings us together against the common enemy, the bastards in suits, the rule-makers, box-tickers and finers. Once they're in the car, and warmed up a bit, it's usually okay as long as we all understand that it's Them Out There whose rules that are fucking Us Up In Here. I'm on your side pal, I'm the best mate you've not found all evening, and unfortunately neither of us can have a fag really, neither of us have got off with anyone all night, both of us have just spent a month's money on pisseey beer, and neither of us

have got any money left for next week either. So, it's not my fault and I'm as crushed as you. But that's it, shove the broken fag back in the crumpled packet, nod off, don't throw up and I'll call you when we get there. I'm saying your words for you because you can't. Tidy.

If they're wagging a donner around as they come up to the door, then it's no deal till they've eaten up the bits they haven't put on their shoes or the pavement. Not a problem in the world with that, cos they're not in the car yet. And they never come out from anywhere nowadays with booze, cos the bouncers kick them senseless if they even get to the doors with a glass.

So, sometimes I do need to be a bit forceful. I don't like the rules, and I don't make them, but let's understand where we are. Mate.

And, more often than not, they've spent their whole lives holding their breath and being shafted by somebody else's rules, visions and initiatives, so they drop into good dog mode without a growl. Yap yap, yup yup, sup sup, pup pup. As long as it's coming from out there not in here, I'm in the clear, I'm in it with them, and they've got something to bleat about to their mates in the boozier tomorrow. All happy. And it means we don't have to pick bits of sick and tobacco out of the creases in the seats so often.

So, with him, I only have to put the light on, and:

"A'right, Drive. Okay. It is okay. It dun't matter."

Again, there's Welsh in it, but all overgrown with something else, with other things that are there, but in the shadows. And the tone's funny. No resignation, no resistance, no communication really, just words given over.

But then, hang on, I can still hear the lid of the tin coming off, hear the rusting, and smell the moist, rich tobacco. He doesn't stop, doesn't even hesitate, he just keeps rolling it, really slow, very careful, like he's building something he wants to last. Bet there's not a shred of it on the seat. Then up, into his mouth, and stop. Just stops. No sound, no words, doesn't make a thing of it, hasn't done all that for me, to show me what he thinks about the rules. Just puts it up to his mouth and stops, because that's what he'd started doing. No search for the light, no reaching over me to push the lighter in like some of the ones do who want a fight. Just stops with it unlit in his mouth and settles. Orange flashes now on black space, with a white bar across.

Along up the Princess Way, and round St Helen's Road. Not a soul. It's just out of cross-over time, the time between the darkening blues becoming black overhead and the dull reds becoming sharp electric orange on the streets, between the white from the shops and the dim yellow from pubs. But all the shoppers went about half past four, leaving the girls in nylon, bored, detached, hanging about the tills texting until six, then off. And now, nobody's arrived to fill the gaps in the town.

Nobody, almost.

Passing all the pale, hollow pubs that look like they're melting through the rain.

Lights red, lights green, stopping, going, but nothing in the way or to give way or watch out for. And the streets orange and shifting in the wet. Slap slap, slap slap. Clear picture of the street, then frosted glass, streaked orange light, then swash, clear again. Not a soul to watch out for. No point in dodging the puddles, no-one to splash.

"Changed," he says.

I'd not forgotten about him, he was too much of an odd one for that, too black and big in the back, but because he held himself back, I'd sort of gotten used to him, switched off from him, like he was a parcel not a person. The voice there again, deep and foreign, breathed up from somewhere strange, and given a lick of Welsh paint near the top before it came out. So, the sound was there, the covering, but other things had happened to it, its qualities had shifted.

Happens a lot, that voice thing. They get in, loud from the pub, the club or the canteen, and they're locked into the voice that's been working best for them, the one that's given them a place, belonging, protection. It usually lasts for a few miles and then, if they're on their own, the coating drops away and they forget to dress for company. They get to sound more and more like their real selves. Posh, foreign, common, soft, tired, whatever it is they've got to cover up when they're out there. Until they arrive, and then the lacquer is applied in seconds, the fare's dealt with in the finished voice and they're off again.

But that wasn't what had happened to him now. There was an expansion in the voice, but not because of where he was. Now it was less broken, not posher, but better finished all the same. There was more command in the words, more wholeness. More in there. Only one word, 'changed', but there were more syllables in it the way he said it; the word seemed to stretch across some space, lie taut across time. He was talking about something, not just making conversation. The town, he meant.

But, I thought he'd not seen it before?

"A lot gone here, a lot missing now that was very beautiful" he says, specific, like he's pointing something out, something particular.

Glance outside and then back on him, see what he's seen, what he's looking at, what he must be craning at. He hadn't moved though, not a muscle. He was bang in the middle of the seat and hadn't moved. Orange flash, but just the black and the band of white. The blackness seemed to swallow the neon, soak it up. No penetration, no illumination, just nullity, absorption.

No eyes to see in the light, no shadows raised or deepened, just black. Looking around without moving; taking it in without pointing towards any of it. But very specific, meaning something.

Lots of them have a go about the town. All the council's fault, they're years behind the times; the way They knock down the lovely old buildings, and They've let it get so busy no-one comes in any more and it's killed the trade, and They've made it all pedestrian now because the traffic's out of control and you can't ever park to use the leisure centre.

But he wasn't doing that. No, he really was seeing something out there that really wasn't there any more.

"No, it's not better, because too much that was beautiful is gone. They've taken so much out from here."

I didn't think it was better either, but hadn't told him. Hadn't let a word out, too busy trying to see if he was looking or just saying it, but he was having one point of view and now I had the other. But he wasn't one of the arguing ones, he wasn't trying to push for a barny, taking things out... He wasn't even having an argument or hearing opposition from outside. What he was talking to was inside, somewhere tucked away, somewhere where that voice of his comes from. But, he might be right, and now I thought of it, I didn't like the change so much either...

"No" he says, final. "You haven't seen it change. There's too much gone from here."

And all of a sudden, he was coming forward, not really leaning forward, not actually moving on the seat, but becoming nearer to me all the same. I couldn't see any of the town or the lights through the mirror out back now, but still I hadn't heard him move on the seat. Orange flashes and blackness, but just blackness in the mirror, with one thin white slash.

"They've taken the old heart from it and left it to die. There isn't anything good left, all the beauty has gone."

There's a sort of thing that some of them say last thing, on the way back from a night looking for the heart of it and finding it gone long ago, never

there, or impossible to find. It moves out of their grasp, it's always one street, one club, one bar, one girl or boy away. Always out of bloody reach.

The more pissed and disenchanted they get, the more the heart of the thing tempts and escapes them. Usually it goes that kind of way: it's not the way it was, it's all gone, all spoiled, and no-one knows like them... Half a bottle of rum to tip into the drinks under the table gets them bleary, but the steady drip of bile from the inside gives it flavour and strength and starts to bite after a while. They're in the back there, trying not to loll too much on the bends, trying not to focus too hard on the moving town, stinking of drink they've paid for with next week's money and bloated with disappointment they actually took with them; they often go home like that.

But he wasn't doing that. He wasn't sorry for himself at all, there was no slurred emotion, no pity in the voice. He was just observing, without looking or moving, sure of his position and telling the truth. And then he had become further from me and the light was back behind us.

No traffic through the streets, then, out of nowhere, a single fire engine looming towards us, blazing blue and black, red and silver, joining in streaks with the rain and the walls and the sheets of glass around us, silent and urgent in the rain. I see it flashing out of sight behind us, small and urgent, blurred into distance.

"Thought you hadn't been here before, though..."

He did that boomy chuckling thing again and then he said, patiently:

"Not since I have grown, but my father, he was here most of his life, and I was here till six years. He came here from our home in Bohemia to work, after the war, after the town had been destroyed here. He was a craftsman in glass. He helped your people build the glass works in the town and he stayed ten years to run it for you. He made the windows for the St Mary church that was rebuilt, and they are the biggest in Wales. They are fine glass. Very beautiful for you. But many of the old buildings have gone now, and the town is not good for you any longer. There is only the beauty in the windows."

The way he said it, the town, the church, the glass was mine. Personally. A gift from his old man. I did feel bad though, as I'd never even noticed the windows.

Getting very close. We came into the square and St Mary's glistened on the green. The church stood large, a bulk of soft, steady, soaked brown stone unmoved by the grass in turmoil around it. Trees lashed the wet air, but the church was not in this storm. And the lights were gone again behind us, and he had come close and my shoulder had his hand on it. And I could feel its shape and weight, rather than seeing it with my eyes, long and dark, on my shoulder. And each finger ridged its way over the crest of the shoulder and pointed down my front, dark, not flesh-coloured, but dark and oiled against cloth. In the orange flash, one finger lifted, swinging slowly, patiently, from side to side.

"That is all there is now, all there is worth leaving. All that should be left, the beautiful walls with the beautiful glass in my father's windows. See, it shines."

And it did. He was right. The church had been built a hundred years ago by the owner of some copper mine that had ruined half the trees, all the rivers and most of the lives in the valley behind the town. It was a big old place, built in soft brown Welsh stone. But nobody I knew really cared much about it, and it just sort of sat there in the middle of things, while life and the town went on around it.

But then, in the war they'd dropped a load of burning bombs right into the middle of the place, taken out all the windows, the roof, and part of the tower had come down. For twenty five years after, it was being re-built, so it got to be a sign of the town's recovery from the war, a sign of modern times, as the brown stones were given their dignity back, cleaned off the soot, the weather stains, and the great wide insides slowly given their covering again. And, I suppose his windows were the final touch.

And the place was out there now, outside in the rain. It was no longer just stones, not just civic dignity, the paid-for grace, a statement of the town's renewal, and a study in the work of men. The windows glowed blue and orange and yellow in the glistening night, and the whole square seemed to be warmed by the colour. And I'd never seen it before, not like that.

The finger tapped my shoulder slowly, assured, reassuring.

"He had to work hard, but he knew when he had done right and it was finished. He could not leave, could not take me and my mother home, till he had put something special there in your church,"

The finger pointed through the rain and through the years and miles to his father's work.

He stopped, and the finger rested. His breathing was clear now, low and dry between each wet run of the wipers. His voice came from far back, but he was close, intent. The car was black inside, while we looked out over the shining orange site. And then car was lifting and the door was creaking on that hinge. He leant in the door and gave me money. A slash of rain across the plastic seat, and in the orange light, he was holding a postcard, of Old Swansea, showing the town between the wars, all brown stone and tall buildings.

"It was beautiful once, all around eh? I will go and see what is left. You come by and pick me up at two, by the big club – ha, I go to the one called the Glassworks? Haa, yes, I will go to The Glassworks."

And the door closed and off he moved, and above the wind I could hear his laugh sounding across the square. Yes, I come by and pick you up at two.

So, out into the town and the rain. There was a group of old ladies, cackling and coughing, all excited from bingo tonight because one of them had taken a spot prize: fifty-five quid. Four years they'd been going, twice a week, and between them it had come to a whole fifty-five quid. They'd had a brandy each on the strength of it, to warm the heart and keep out the chill, then the fare took six quid, so there wasn't a lot left to go in the china jug on the mantelpiece back home, but they were still over the moon, and the chatter carried on right till they all got out, on the corner of their road, to save a few bob. Habits die hard, even after a big win. And the chuckles and cries went off up the pavement:

"There's a thing, who'd have thought. Never thought we'd get a win..."

"Nearly died when they called it."

"See you Wednesday, love." "

"A'right, Sal. Bye, love. Be lucky." And another explosion of giggles.

And then some men in suits from the station, all tired, grey skinned and tight lipped. Grumpy at the weather, ending their day in the middle of everyone else's evening, and already feeling the worries about tomorrow. Expense accounts, but not in the mood to spread them around, they just wanted to get into the hotel bar. No tips there.

Later, after ten, some girls on a long-planned night out, already giggly with shots they'd had at home, topped off by the tipped-downed doubles at the Hanbury. Determined to have a good time out on the watery streets, they were off to find it at *Barbarella's*. A four quid fare, all giggles and screeching, with a bit of mucking around from them about whether I'd come in for a drink and a dance. Thanks girls, lovely, ta for the tip. No love, I can't do two, I'm booked, but here's a card: Sheena'll sort you out. Good old Sheena, up there at the smoky centre of things, she'll get you all home.

And after a Chinese from the carton and a coffee at the station with some of the lads, at quarter to, I was back in the square. But this time the lights from the church were out and the place was stretched tight by strobing blue. Patrol cars stopped across the road and an ambulance up on the pavement, eerie blue splashed on the wet walls. Not much of a crowd, just a

few swaying folk from the clubs, watching till the rain got inside their jackets, then wandering off for kebabs and cabs.

“Hiya mate. You got a pick-up? They’ll have to wait, see. Can’t get any closer I’m ‘fraid, not till we’ve sorted this lot out. Some poor bastard got in a ruck by the bogs, got a bottle on his neck. He staggered out and the bouncers tried to help, but bleeding like a pig he was. It’s all over the place, down the foyer and out onto the pavement. Nothing they could do.”

So I got out, seeing if I could find my man, standing out, huge against the crowd.

Elbowing through the damp crowd down to the doors and, yes, there he was, still huge. A huge black shape on the pavement between the paramedics. The pavement ran red into the gutter, and in the lights of the club it shone in a pink spray where the rain was splashing down. Yes, there he was, out there in all this rain.

On the deck in all this damn Welsh rain.

One Way

I'd never ordered a taxi before. Not in Swansea. Ever.

But I did ring up and book this, just like a punter, even though I could've booked one with Sheena or Jen on any of the shifts over the past couple of weeks. I suppose I could've even put the booking into the system myself. But, I didn't, because I wanted to be the fare, wanted to reverse the role, wanted to feel like I was separate from this thing that I'd been doing for the past ninety-five years.

Once I'd realised that I was going, once I'd given my notice and told everyone, I felt a bit like I had new shoes on; ones that were just a bit too big, that I kept catching and bumping on things. All the normal activities didn't quite work properly now.

On Wednesday last week, the last but one day, I dropped a fare off and started to drive away before he'd come around to the window to pay me. The poor bugger didn't know what to do. I realised pretty quick, almost as soon as I'd pulled off really, but it was fifty yards before I could pull up to the kerb. I think the fare, a forty-something suit carrying a fair number of business lunches around, thought I was taking the piss. It must've seemed like a sort of daft game. I was going to jump out and run back to apologise, but he was already chugging up the road after me, wagging a tenner. When he got level with the cab, I could see his face was all tense, he was a bit uncertain, unsure whether this joke was going to have another part to it. He probably thought that Jeremy Beadle'd leap out of a nearby van followed by a camera crew, and let him in on

the joke. But, no, it was just me. It did have a funny side, because he gave me the money, and things were so odd, that I started reaching in my pocket to get a tip for him.

Well, at least he'll have a funny story to tell the gang up in the bar of the Premier Inn later.

Now, I couldn't really focus on the job, I was getting everything half cocked. When I took the car into the base another night, it was pissing down. I pulled it under the big corrugated iron canopy, and because it was about half six and Billy would've gone, I got ready to hoover and tidy it myself. I don't think it's fair to just leave it there for Billy to find at six in the morning – he works hard enough in the twelve hours he's there without having extra cars dumped on him from the night before. Lots of the blokes do though. They think he's just a skivvy.

I had both the back doors open to get the hoover pipe across the seats, and so I could lean in easily. Did the vacuuming, rubbed the chamois over dash and screen, and then I put the hoover away. Then I got in the car and parked it up in the far corner of the yard in the pissing rain with both back doors open. The boys were probably bloody glad to see the back of me before I did any serious damage.

It was hard seeing Andrea for the last time. We both thought it was probably the last time, and we'd known that it was coming for weeks – she said months, but it was still hard. In the past year we'd gotten really close and we had had some great days, and evenings and nights together. I'd met all her

friends, and had dinner at her house, and been to a couple of things at the uni, and she had been to the Founders.

She'd finished her finals, and it looked like she was on for a 2:1 or possibly a first if the finance paper worked out. She kidded that they handed out 2;1s now as a matter of course, that the fees everyone paid were a guarantee of a good degree, but we both knew that wasn't true. She was smart, could do her course and the jobs it would bring, in her sleep.

Her last exam was a week ago, and Pia had finished just on Friday, so the two of them were setting everything up for the big trip. We had a funny evening on Saturday after she'd had a whole load of vaccinations and was acting like a muppet for a couple of hours, all distracted and strange. She couldn't stop giggling and mucking about, until about ten o'clock, when she fell asleep in my lap, tipped half a glass of wine all over my legs, and didn't even wake when I carried her into the bedroom.

We hadn't ever once made the awful mistake of saying that I should go with her and Pia, or that I should try to meet up with them, or that we'd wait for each other. Both of us knew that the second we'd said something like that, the clouds would gather and ice would form on the windows. So, we've kept it sunny, free, forward looking. And, I'm a bit surprised, but it feels right. I think.

We will keep in touch, and she said she'll email and perhaps call, but no promises from either of us. I said I'd email and that if she was in a place where I could reach her, I'd call her... but no promises.

"Anyway Señor," she said "You are going to be in the middle of nowhere for the next two months, so no phones and more than likely no email either.

They won't take kindly to you whipping out the iPad in some monastery. *You* will have to be silent. And *devout*. And *meek*. And *humble...*" and she kissed me, and we took the rest of the wine to the bedroom. 'Stocking up' she called it.

I'd always wanted to walk to Santiago. No idea why. It was nothing to do with that terrible time with Lynne in Getaria; I wasn't tracking back over old ground or recovering anything. Anyway, I knew that Lynne was in Sri Lanka working with refugees. This was a walk, more than a pilgrimage. I just wanted to walk across the top of Spain. Everyone down the Founders and in the firm was taking the piss out of me, thinking I'd become some sort of religious nut.

But everyone was really good to me, behind all the jokes, too. The boys from the rugby club got me a box, a beautiful little box, about four inches by four, brass corners and hinges. And when I opened it, for a second I couldn't see what the hell they'd given me. Then it clicked: the inside was padded with sacking and the box held the remains of a cremated cricket stump.

"Well, we'd heard that all you pilgrims have to deal in this stuff," said Terry.

But, they also bought me a pair of the best walking boots I've ever seen. Yes, I could take them back if the size was wrong, yes, they'd exchange if I didn't like them or if they weren't right. But no, lads, I wouldn't take them back. Ever. And, as it happens, they fit like gloves. I've been wearing them almost every day for the past fortnight, and for the last four days at work, I walked to the garage in them instead of taking the car, all the way from Mumbles to

Cowyn, just to start getting in trim before the off. Feet seem to be holding up so far.

The whole route from Le Puy in south central France to Santiago, plus an extra push to Cape Finisterre was about a thousand miles. The book Andrea'd got me said it would take about two and a half months. Which would take me nicely till mid-August and I'd get back with a three or four weeks to sort myself out before going to uni in Norwich.

I'd made an application to uni without any real hope of being accepted; I thought I'd have to do a course or some A levels again or something, especially after I'd left Lancaster part way through the course there. But, I sent off, and got asked for interview. That was a bit nerve-wracking. I hadn't had an interview for years. Didn't have any smart clothes, wasn't sure what I'd be asked, wasn't sure what to say.... In fact, I was going to go up there in ordinary scruffy clothes, but Andrea made me buy a jacket and a decent shirt for the thing. Not formal, but nice, made me feel a bit more confident. And as it turned out, they hardly asked me anything, just chatted to me really. Asked me what I'd been reading recently, what I thought of it, what sorts of stuff I read generally and why... Well I suppose for an English degree that made sense. I had no problem with any of that, cos I spend half my life reading, when it's quiet, in the car or in the back of the office.

Took two days off for the interview, so I could go up there the night before and stay over, have a look around. Just the day before I went off, I was taking Mr Rivera back from town to the house, which was really coming on now. He'd had the front garden cleared and re-planted and it looked great now

everything was coming up and flowering. We'd been chatting as we drove down, and when we got to the house, he asked me to stop and come in for a minute. Usually he would ask me to drop off a letter for him on the way back through town, or deliver some parcel or other.

"Don, I should like it if you would just wait here for a moment," he said as he stepped off into the spare bedroom.

Two minutes later, he came out with his old beauty, that bloody gorgeous suitcase of his. I could see that he's given it a bit of a shine and rub, and it glowed a deep rich brown. He held it out:

"I have no more travelling to do. It needs someone to take care of it and to make sure it keeps moving across the world. Norwich, it has never been to.

I really did not know what to say to him, but I mumbled something about incredible generosity and a promise to treasure this personal gift, and that it would always go with me...

"Don, you sound like the mayor making a speech!" He put his hand on my shoulder. "Just make sure you do go, that you do take the degree and that this goes with you, eh?" and he smiled and directed me down the hall and out of the door.

"Let me know how it goes?" he said as I put that case, my case in the boot.

And I did, and I showed him the letter that arrived a week later to offer me the place. And I'll be taking that case with me. Not to Spain, because that'll be backpack territory, and the boys at work got me one of those, but to

Norwich it will go. And the hundred-pound cheque Mr Rivera had put in the case "for some books" would help me go too.

And now, I am here, waiting. Not for fares, not for the train from bloody Paddington, but for my train to pull out.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

In providing a 'critical consideration of the relationship between the literary composition and contemporary or traditional achievements in the genre', this commentary will present

- I. general introduction to the creative work,
- II. discussion of the narrative form and organisation of the work, comprising:
 - a. consideration of the ways that the work is shaped by modernist concerns and structures, particularly those of the modernist 'city novel',
 - b. consideration of the way that the work is structured to present a collection of linked and inter-related narratives, broadly referred to as a short-story sequence
- III. discussion of the extent to which the work can be placed within the canon of Welsh writing in English; in particular:
 - a. the ways in which the work constitutes a recognisable piece of Welsh writing in English and the extent to which it treats the concerns of one of the national literatures
 - b. the ways in which the work makes considered and constructive use of its setting in Swansea.

The broad premise of the work is that the narrator, a taxi driver called Don or Donno, working in a small-ish south Wales city during the early twenty-first century, finds his working life fascinating, but in ways that are spiritually unfulfilling. He feels that he observes rather than plays a part in his own life and the life of the city in which he lives. His attitude to his own working life, to his family and to his community is knowing, interested, but generally cynical. Initially through his meeting with one of his passenger-characters, an old friend whom he has not seen for some time, and through subsequent conversations with, and reflections on, the remarks and actions of passengers the work follows Don's gradual, detached, re-evaluation of his life, relationships, and the city.

The smallish city of the book is Swansea. Treatment of landscape and general neighbourhoods will be recognisable to natives of the city, as will statements about the city's history and industries. In writing to retain a sense of location and geography, and to enable an exploration of small-city Welsh life within the work, it was necessary to retain sufficient features of the city of Swansea as would make the location convincing (especially to a Welsh/southern-Welsh audience). There are, however, a number of fictional neighbourhoods and locations added to the city in the work, for example: the rich suburb of Glenpool where Mikey's parents live (chapter 3, 'Mikey'); the area of Caeravon where Mr and Mrs Griffiths live in their 'static' (chapter 8 'The Small Couple'); and the area of Cowyn, where the taxi firm has its base (chapter 4, 'Sheena'); the area of Penrhyn where the squaddie's parents live and at whose house Don drops him twice and picks him up once (chapter 11, 'Nicely', chapter

15, 'Off the Vine', chapter 19). Names of hotels, pubs and businesses are for the most part, though not all, fictional. To closely identify specific locations in these cases would have drawn readers' attention away from the cultural, social, political or narrative point at issue, and into an assessment of narratorial verisimilitude in a literal sense unhelpful to the progress of the work.

Structurally, the work takes its main substance from a group of closely linked stories or sequences of narrative concerning, or in some cases, narrated by, each of the passengers in the taxi. These stories are bound apparently more by accidents of situation and coincidental connections than by any external force or logic. The passenger episodes sometimes present complete and self-contained narratives, sometimes are broken or partial narratives, or sometimes provide the vehicle for Don to present stories of his own. All of these narratives will impose upon, inform, and stand in relief against the other, fractured, narrative running through the work and providing links between the stories, which consists of Don's self-reflection as he works. These elements see Don reflecting on his city, his colleagues, his passengers, his own life, as well as the family life and upbringing that has led him to his current position.

Thus, the work presents two, at times contesting, at times inter-twined, sets of narratives:

The first set of narratives is the 'taxi stories' – which involve the characters who step in and out of the taxi. These tales emanate from a cast of characters who impose in an immediate way upon Don's working and conscious world. Through primary characters, we are also introduced to a range of other secondary characters depicted by the passengers, in the stories they tell. Both

sets of characters in these episodes allow the driver to re-interpret the things he knows, or thinks he knew, from his past and his family life.

The status of the driver shifts incrementally as the work progresses, so that he begins the piece largely observing and reflecting on others, but becomes a figure who is able finally, though still tentatively, to begin ordering – and more importantly, contributing to, the narrative of his own life. That brings questions: about himself, his family, and his town and, less overtly, about his Welshness, with all the associated local and broader cultural resonances. At the close of the work, though the driver's future, like the futures of his city and nation, remains unassigned, he approaches it with a firmer sense of direction (if not purpose) and a clearer understanding of his own culture and identity.

However, like many moments in the history of his nation, such marshalling of strength and identity has a habit of being impermanent, shifting.

As Gwyn A. Williams says:

...the Welsh have made themselves. They have made themselves over repeatedly because they have had to make themselves against the odds... They survived by making and re-making themselves and their Wales over and over again. So far, they have survived for over a millennium and a half: one of the minor miracles of history. The presiding spirit of Welsh history has been the shape-shifter Gwydion the Magician, who always changed his shape and stayed the same.¹

And, shifting yet staying the same is precisely what Don does. It is the role of barber, the butler, the taxi driver, to listen, to be constant, and to submerge the self to the moment of engagement with the employer or customer. He must present as Don, the familiar face and personality to his

¹ Williams, Glyn A, 1985.

regular customers, and to his colleagues, but nonetheless, he is changed, is shifted, by the narrative that develops around him.

The second set of narratives, woven through and around the taxi passengers' stories, are Don's personal and family narratives. Gradually these explore the history and lives of a number of members of his family, and in doing so, re-order, and re-prioritise Don's construction of self. Through the exploration of these narratives, the work delivers a number of perspectives on the history of the communities in which the family lived and in front of and through which the taxi stories now move. The family stories go back to the driver's grandfather's time, but are presented loosely, out of sequence, in an order that has greater correspondence to their emotional importance, or in response to the triggers from the various passenger narratives, rather than being ordered in any linear fashion. What is learned about the driver and his family is set against a background of city, culture, and broader national identity shifting through the past eight decades across which the work is set. As we become aware that the driver is slowly reordering his sense of personal identity through revision and recollection, so we are increasingly aware that the narrator and many of the people in his city lack any clear, shared, notion of what it is to be Welsh in this particular place at this time.

Through the contesting nature of Don's own life stories and his recollections about family, the work raises questions in the reader's mind about which narratives are privileged, and which if any, are reliable. As the work progresses, the realisation comes that none of the narratives is privileged, that all contest for dominance and primacy in the driver's mind. The work of several

modernist writers informs this aspect of the project: Dos Passos for multiple narratives that develop broader political and social patterning²; Faulkner for contesting narratives through which personal and family perspectives thread and run parallel³, and Anderson, for interlaced narratives that speak of small-town life, inwardness, and tight horizons⁴.

The narrative of 'Ugly Lovely' forms around incidents and moments, often recollected by Don with intensity of detail for physical setting and atmosphere, but imperfectly in emotional terms and with self-interest in place of veracity, but this is how the driver (and all of us, perhaps) works towards a sense of self. As Woolf puts it to Strachey:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.⁵

Both narrative streams are disrupted incrementally and subject to gradual revision as the work progresses. The driver's early encounter with an old school friend, Mikey, whose life has now moved, with attendant success, out of and beyond the small-ish, Welsh city begins this process. In the success of Mikey, we are reminded of Dylan Thomas' 'well known' remark that Swansea is 'the graveyard of ambition'. Of course, whether or not Thomas actually said this (and it's likely he didn't) is indicative of the myth-making capacity that 'Dylan's

² Particularly *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and *USA* (the collected trilogy published 1939, published as separate volumes *The 42nd Parallel* [1930], *Nineteen-Nineteen* [1932], *The Big Money* [1936]).

³ Particularly in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

⁴ Particularly *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and *Poor White* (1920).

⁵ Woolf, Virginia; Ch. 13, pp126-7.

Swansea' has developed over the decades since the remark wasn't made. The work plays upon this capacity for invention, re-writing and embellishment, and it features – subtly rather than overtly, in both the narrator's observations of his town, and passengers, as well as being a hallmark of his family relations and the entire family's collusive myth-making capacity.

There are links between the family and taxi stories, and some occasional connections in action and character, beyond the driver's presence around or in both. The stories involving the family sometimes echo the outcomes of stories from the cab characters, and *vice versa*. Generally, the family stories are 'smaller', set within a domestic and localised frame, the driver's recollection of episodes moving apparently randomly, according to triggered memory and external stimuli. The cab characters' tales, however, move around a broader set, free to expand the scale and settings for the work outside and beyond the city, and sometimes with greater historical reach. A story about loyalty within the family may, for example, be echoed in a cab character's tale, or in an observation from the taxi, but the correspondence is intended to be indistinct, otherwise the work becomes too mechanistic. As Maurice Shadbolt warns, the dangers of repetition and recurrent structure are particularly strong for the writer of short narratives:

The perils of the form should be clear, and need no restating here: performing seals, doing the same tricks over and over, are more evident in the short story than in any other form of literature.⁶

⁶ Shadbolt, Maurice, in 'The Hallucinatory Point', from May, Charles E., (Ed) 1994, p 270.

So, the work progresses incrementally, for slowly Don realises his plight. He has a fondness for his family, and an interest in his customers that is, for him, hard to resist. It is what keeps him taxi driving – the endless fascination with who might open the door, where they might go, and what might be the purpose of their journey. It has caught him. He lives on symbols, clues and the elements of personality that cross his path. He relishes the puzzle, the buzz; until the sense of things starts to crumble and Don begins to question why, how, and who he is, and why he is still where he is doing what he does.

Don's driving puts him in a privileged position as observer of other people's lives. As Don observes about Kev, the chauffeur-cum-hearse-cum-wedding-car driver for the local firm of Aldred's:

he works for Aldred's he gets all the latest on who's going to whose christening, wedding, silver anniversary or funeral. Every frock and suit event in life, they're there in the back of his car, so that Kev gets a cradle to grave, rear-view insight into the loves, lives and passing of Swansea's people.⁷

Don and his taxi-driver colleagues are not quite witness to all the 'frock and suit' events of their passengers' lives in the way that Kev and his colleagues are in their more formal role, but they are party to much of the more casual - and often more intimate, unguarded goings on in the lives of Swansea's people. This level of insight, this level of voyeuristic access to other people's lives has hooked Don and he finds it hard to give up.

Whilst Don's stasis is partly a result of the grip exercised by the job, we realise as the novel progresses that it is also strongly a result of inherent and

⁷ 'Fallen', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

deep-rooted inabilities to deal with emotional crises – or even emotional norms, to make decisions, to act in the face of challenge. We learn from his actions and remarks in, for example, 'Over the Water' and 'Into the Light', that Don is not good at recognising and rising to emotional challenges in his own life. He moves away from confrontation, but in doing so moves away from close relationships, and from any true grasp of his own future.

In the chapter 'Into the Light', we hear about Don's childhood, and learn that even as a child he was closed up, emotionally stretched and unable to voice his feelings. In a scene recounted in the story, Don has made his way along the steeply sloping and slippery Mumbles sea wall, balancing for the most part, but falling onto his hands and knees on the rough concrete many times. Don is delighted with his achievement but as he waits for his parents to catch him up, see what he has done and applaud him, we hear that even at this young age he is struggling to express emotion without contradictions and conflict. He is:

... glowing, but trying to be casual, not too triumphant. It was for them to realise, to come to an awareness of the scale of my achievement.⁸

And the bitter blow for Don comes in his parents' response, as they ignore his triumph and focus instead on the state of his clothes:

But all they said was:
 "Oh Don, look at your shoes mun, they're covered in muck. Just look at the seat of your shorts boy! You sponge them off, now when we get in."
 And I felt betrayed, and my eyes stung as much as my hands.⁹

⁸ 'Into the Light', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁹ 'Into the Light', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

Of course here – as throughout his life, he allows his eyes to sting but never speaks of, or shows, his pain.

The pattern is established early then, and repeats. Later in the same story Don separates – or more accurately, is left by, Lynne, with whom he has had a strong relationship. She is frustrated by his lack of forward motion, his acceptance of what she regards as defeat. The final moments of their relationship are characterised by Don's silence, his inability to show or respond to his feelings. The text highlights his self-deception, as well as his inactivity. At this point in 'Ugly Lovely', where Don is reflecting on this episode from the past, he has already started, very slowly, to realise his own levels of prevarication and inactivity:

"Come on love, it's not like that. I'm just settling back into things, sorting myself out for a few months, then I'll be up again." I can remember those words so well: - sorting myself out for a couple of months.

"You stupid bastard. It's been nearly two years and you've just given up! Well I haven't and I'm not going to!"¹⁰

The end for Don and Lynne is one-sided in its movement. She is the departing object and he remains, in stasis:

I couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't feel anything properly. All I had a sense of was the walls towering on both sides, and this bloody mud-brick stairway carving up the middle.

She kept her hands stretched out, took another step, looked at me, puzzled, as if she didn't quite recognise me, and then turned. I watched her go, the fine brown legs carrying her further and further towards the sunlight.¹¹

¹⁰ 'Into the Light', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

¹¹ 'Into the Light', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

His focus here is on the intensity of the visual, spatial and auditory elements of the encounter. He is sharply aware of the 'walls towering', the 'mud-brick stairway carving up the middle', the dog he hears 'yapping' from inside one of the neighbouring houses, Lynne's 'fine brown legs', and the stark sunlight towards which they carry her, and all of these are intensely registered.

Throughout the work, such moments occur: the registering of heat, cold and damp, when getting coal for Gramps in 'Up on the Hill'; the interplay of light and dark and shadow during the ride with the Bohemian sailor in 'Glass'; the intense and detailed description of Alan's death in 'Alan' – all these mark the forensic power of Don's observation, but his inability to register emotional input, outcomes and forces with anything like the same concentration. In his relationships with family, with girlfriends, and in his reactions to the city around him, Don is an intense observer, but appears incapable of action because he is disconnected emotionally.

If a central feature of Don's predicament and of the work's focus is Don's intense observational power held in contrast with emotional paralysis, then it is clearly important to understand the ways that 'Ugly Lovely' is structured and shaped to record his impressions. In such a discussion we shall be able to see the extent to which 'Ugly Lovely' draws upon twentieth-century renderings of modernity, and in particular the ways that it makes productive use of some elements found in modernist city novels to provide a relief against which such moments of disjunction are registered.

The narrative form and organisation of 'Ugly Lovely' is governed by an attempt to explore the urban (smallish-city urban, but urban nonetheless),

experiences of subjectivity, intimacy, solitude where they intersect and conflict. These were key concerns in the writing of the work, and should, if it is successful, draw upon other writers' work in ways that are discernible, yet allow the work to remain original and involving.

Both Don and the characters he encounters or hears about are used to explore the proximate isolation that is the experience of city life. In this respect, chiefly, the work has its affinities with the interest of modernist treatments of city life. To a lesser extent the work also makes use of a number of the stylistic and formal innovations of modernism. The texts discussed below provide appropriate models of narrative approaches that are useful in presenting not only Don's partial, restricted and temporally fractured experience of others and their stories, but also a useful means to treat the cultural and economic uncertainties experienced by the people of Swansea during the latter part of the twentieth century.

However, there are considerable difficulties of definition and meaning involved in any discussion of Modernism. As Tim Armstrong identifies:

Modernism is in fact characterised by a series of seeming contradictions: both a rejection of the past and a fetishization of certain earlier periods; both a primitivism and a defence of civilization against the barbarians; both enthusiasm for the technological and fear of it; both a celebration of impersonal making and a stress on subjectivity. It is both politically and sexually radical, and drawn to Fascism as an expression of a stability of social relations; both lofty in its cultural aims, declaring the autonomy of the artist, and preoccupied with self-promotion and market relations¹²

¹² Armstrong, Tim, 2008, p. 50.

Since the busiest period of critical writing about modernism and modernist texts began in earnest in the 1960s, critics have tried to come to terms with modernism from a number of different perspectives. Looking back, we can see a mushrooming of definition, delineation, categorisation and enumeration, almost all of which led to an eventual recognition that the best that may be attempted and accepted as reliable and useful in the search for definition is a pinpointing one or more key features, concerns or 'common traits'¹³ which may or may not be part of particular 'modernist' forms. The general acceptance of such an incremental/elemental approach to identifying the variety and variability of attributes that contribute to our sense of a 'modernist' work is perhaps most succinctly captured in the plural term used to title Peter Nicholls' highly successful and influential work *Modernisms*¹⁴.

If, then, we are to seek prominent features of modernist techniques, concerns and approaches which may be identified in 'Ugly Lovely', it is useful to begin by identifying at this stage some of those generally accepted as occurring frequently in works widely considered 'modernist'.

Richard Sheppard, enumerates and sources the origins of identification for the many 'key features' and concerns identified with any frequency across the critical writing of the past forty five years. He trims these into the following list as:

'uncompromising intellectuality',¹⁵ a 'preoccupation with Nihilism',¹⁶ a 'discontinuity',¹⁷ an attraction to the Dionysiac¹⁸, a

¹³ The project for approaching definition and understanding of modernism was raised in these terms initially by Maurice Bebe, 1973, pp. 1065-80.

¹⁴ Nichols, P., first published 1995, revised edition 2009.

¹⁵ Levin, H., 1966 pp. 271-95.

¹⁶ Spears, Monroe, K., 1976, pp. 3-4.

'formalism', and 'attitude of detachment', the use of myth 'as an arbitrary means of ordering art',¹⁹ a reflexivism,²⁰ an 'anti-democratic' cast of mind, an emphasis on subjectivity, a 'feeling of alienation and loneliness', the sense of 'the ever-present threat of chaos... in conjunction with the sense of search' and the 'experience of panic terror',²¹ a particular form of irony which derives from the 'rift between self and world',²² 'consciousness, observation and detachment',²³ and a commitment to metaphor as the very essence of poetry itself'.²⁴

However, the difficulties don't end there, for as Sheppard later points out:

Once torn out of the context which generated them, it becomes evident that almost none of these characteristics, whether formal or experiential is specific to the modernist period...

It also becomes clear that more than one of them, depending on which author, works or culture one selects, could arguably be privileged in any reductionist account of modernism.²⁵

Steven Giles, in his introduction to *Theorizing Modernism Essays in Critical Theory*²⁶ identifies the angles from which critical approaches have come, in grouping and categorising the disparate elements of modernist works according to theoretical standpoints and interests:

To try to define modernism around a more broadly based strategy, numerous critics have approached the matter on historical, literary-historical and sociological terms. Thus we have modernism as 'a continuation or contrast with Romanticism, as a reaction ... against Aestheticism, as an inversion of the culture of Realism; as a contrast with Expressionism, Futurism and Surrealism ... and as a precursor to postmodernism, as a product of the megalopolitan experience, and the

¹⁷ Spears, op. cit., p. 20; also Wilde, Alan, 1981, pp.16, 19.

¹⁸ Spears, op. cit., p.35; also Foster, John Burt Jnr., 1981, pp. 21-64.

¹⁹ Bebe, M., op. cit., p. 1073.

²⁰ Gibbons, Tom, 1973, pp. 1140-57, and p. 1150.

²¹ Brazill, William J. Jr., 'Art and the "Panic Terror"', in Chapple, G., & Schulte, Hans, H. (Eds.), 1981, pp. 529-39, pp. 531-3.

²² Wilde, op. cit., pp. 3, 6, 9-10, 16-17, 41.

²³ Fokkema, D., and Ibsch, E., 1987, pp. 22, 318. p.60.

²⁴ Schwartz, S., 1985, pp. 71-74.

²⁵ Sheppard, R., 'The Problematics of European Modernism', in Giles, S., 1993, pp. 1-5, 33-42.

²⁶ Giles S., 1993.

Great War, and as a result of the serious arts being forced to cede their ... function to the "mass media of communication and entertainment"'.²⁷

Alan Wilde makes broadly the same point with considerably greater economy, positing that modernist writers and visual artists were frequently – sometimes knowingly and self-consciously, sometimes unknowingly - 'heirs to the traditions they revolted against'.²⁸

As successive generations of critics, under the influence and in support of successive critical schools and interests, have re-visited the problematics of definition and identification of modernism and its features, despite the divergence (and as Sheppard suggests above), there is growing acceptance that as Michael Levenson says;

Within the historical revision there can still be found certain common devices and general pre-occupations: the recurrent act of fragmenting unities (unities of character or plot or pictorial space of lyric form), the use of mythic paradigms, the refusal of norms of beauty, the willingness to make radical linguistic experiment, all inspired by the resolve (in Eliot's phrase) to startle and disturb the public.

But, following these remarks, Levenson does also acknowledge that:

Increasingly, . . . attention has fallen upon a range of irreducibly local ambitions, highly particular projects not broadly shared but peculiar to a band of eager practitioners working in a sharply delimited field. So much of the artistic passion of the period was stirred by questions of technique, where "technique" should not suggest attention to "form" as opposed to "content", but should imply rather the recognition that every element of the work is an instrument of its effect and therefore open to technical revision.²⁹

This recognition of the holistic and individual nature of modernity in a work is useful in placing 'Ugly Lovely' within its own context and in identifying – and

²⁷ Sheppard, op. cit. pp2-3.

²⁸ Wilde, Alan, 1981, p. 40.

²⁹ Levenson, M., (Ed.), 2011, p. 3

accepting - the creative influences and forces driving its composition. In the sections that follow we shall explore the particular 'local ambitions' and features of 'Ugly Lovely' that demonstrate the impact and influence felt from a range of modernist concerns and writers.

Before entering into broader discussion of the variety of ways that the work may be seen to possess any of the 'key features' or attributes of modernist writing identified above, however, we might usefully identify one of the modern/modernist elements of the central structure about which 'Ugly Lovely' is built. The work is given both its narrative structure (as well as a degree of freshness and relief from the repetitiveness as referred to by Maurice Shadbolt, above), in its replaying of recurrent pick-ups, journeys and drop-offs. The churn of passengers through the narrative allows what are in fact similar days and journeys to be seemingly different and distinct. Here, we might invoke David Frisby's wry summation of Walter Benjamin's characterisation of what constitutes 'the modern'. Frisby sums up Benjamin's position on the fragmentary and re-constituted nature of modernity as 'the recurrence of the ever-same in the guise of the ever-new'.³⁰ This seems to refer directly to 'Ugly Lovely' and its core structure.

Turning first to a grouping of key attributes identified by Sheppard *et al* as variously: a 'feeling of alienation and loneliness', a particular form of irony which derives from the 'rift between self and world', and a depiction of 'consciousness, observation and detachment' which may be seen to manifest itself in a general 'attitude of detachment', it is possible to link these attributes

³⁰ Frisby, David, 1985, p. 36.

to a key feature of the writing which generates the: the interest in and depiction of the urban experience in modern life. This holds true for 'Ugly Lovely', where a number of Don's observations, many of his passengers and the tone of a great deal of the narrative is powered by expressions of urban alienation and detachment.

A particular focus for modernist artists writing in and about western Europe or the United States during the early twentieth century was the experience of the city-dweller in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Malcolm Bradbury notes,

Modernist writing has a strong tendency to encapsulate experience within the city, and to make the city-novel, or city-poem one of its main forms. Hence, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Hamsun's *Hunger*, James's *The Princess Casamassima* ... Doblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* ... Conrad's *The Secret Agent* ... Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*...³¹

These works produce a roll-call of European and US capitals and urban centres. In analysing the features of 'Ugly Lovely', we need to be confident that such concerns as are raised in these novels-of-the-capital-city also apply to a work set in a smallish Welsh city. To do so, we might begin by focussing in on those characteristics of the works mentioned by Bradbury and ask whether they are characteristics of city fiction in a wider context, rather than being solely the province of capital city fiction. In discussing the city novel, Blanche Gelfant notes that:

Behind the rise of the modern city novel has been the awareness – always growing stronger and more clearly articulated – that city life is

³¹ 'The Cities of Modernism' in Bradbury, M., & McFarlane, J., (Eds.) 1976, p. 100.

distinctive and that it offers the writer peculiar modern material and demands of him literary expression in a modern idiom ... the city has made its impression not only as a physical place, but more important as a characteristic and unique way of life.³²

Swansea is a city, by official designation, since 1969, but still 'smallish'. It obviously lacks the throbbing capital-city scale of Berlin, New York, Paris, Chicago or London as treated by the artists of the works cited by Bradbury. However, Swansea does share something of the city experience treated in works of modernity, largely because it was, even in the latter part of the twentieth-century, a city still being made anew, in much the same way as many of the cities written about by modernist novelists.

In a city devastated by war, Swansea centre had to be almost entirely re-built, and re-built in ways that detached it from its Victorian, and even medieval past. In addition to the widespread destruction and rebuilding which simply provided a 'new' urban experience the like of which only perhaps three British cities³³ experienced, a number of key buildings such as the Guildhall were showpieces for an overt modernist architectural re-birth of the (then) town. As the City of Swansea architecture department acknowledges, there were even overt modernist statements made in the rebuilding: 'The Guildhall has undergone several alterations and extensions, but it has retained its original character as an example of 'a classical approach to modernism'.³⁴

³² Gelfant, Blanche, 1970, p. 3.

³³ Coventry, Southampton, London (east and central city), Liverpool central, and Swansea, were the only British cities to sustain widespread damage that effectively remodelled entire areas - or the entire centre as in the cases of Swansea, Southampton and Coventry.

³⁴ City and County of Swansea website, architecture and civic buildings: <http://www.swansea.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1523> Accessed 14 March 2013.

During the Second World War and particularly during the three-night 'Swansea Blitz' of February 1941, most of the city's eighteenth to early twentieth century character was erased entirely:

...Swansea suffered most severely. Between 1940 and 1943 there were 44 raids on the town. A total of 340 people were killed, including 230 who died in the three night blitz of 19, 20 21 February 1941. The entire town centre was destroyed and extensive damage was inflicted upon other quarters such as Brynhyfryd, Townhill, and Manselton. With Swansea aflame, the children were evacuated . . . There were further raids on Swansea, including a ferocious one in February 1942 when 34 people were killed.³⁵

According to City and County of Swansea council records, the raids involved the dropping of:

1,273 high explosive bombs and 56,000 incendiary devices to devastate an area of 41 acres . . . 857 properties were destroyed, 11,000 properties were damaged. 230 people were killed, 409 were injured. . . some of Swansea's oldest buildings, the Castle, Swansea Museum, and the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery survived, but the town's commercial heart was razed and the Ben Evans department store, which seemed to have supplied everyone with everything for upward of fifty years, was flattened.³⁶

The extent of devastation in terms of tonnage of bombs dropped was 'unique outside London', and so shocking and debilitating to the people of south Wales, that Churchill visited the town to restore morale in the weeks after the bombing.

When Dylan Thomas visited the town shortly after the 1941 bombing, he was shocked by the devastation. In his radio script 'Return Journey' (written 1943, but first broadcast in 1947), Thomas recalls his visit after the bombing.

³⁵ Davies, John, 2007, p 584.

³⁶ Web records from City and County of Swansea, 'Swansea in the Blitz' at <http://www.swansea.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=42116>. Retrieved, 10 August 2011.

He mourned not only the material loss of the old centre, but also the loss of the thriving artistic hub that had been established between the twenties and thirties in coffee bar The Kardomah, and wrote:

The Kardomah café was razed to the snow, the voices of the coffee-drinkers - poets, painters, and musicians in their beginnings - all lost.³⁷

The Kardomah had been a haunt for some of Swansea's blossoming inter-war artist groups. Later dubbed 'The Kardomah Gang', the most prominent group included poets Vernon Watkins, Charles Fisher and Dylan Thomas, composer Daniel Jones, artists Mervyn Levy and Fred Janes. Along with Thomas, many of the group later left Swansea for London.

The loss of one of Swansea's key pre-war artistic centres was acute for Thomas and a liberal elite - , but for the general population, the bomb damage meant life in a town of ruins and bombsites until well into the late 1960s. We hear, for example in 'Glass' the soulful view of the Bohemian sailor, who voices much of what Don and his passengers feel about the soulless city that grew up after the war:

my father . . . came here from our home in Bohemia to work, after the war, after the town had been destroyed here. He was a craftsman in glass. He helped your people build the glass works in the town and he stayed ten years to run it for you. He made the windows for the St Mary church that was rebuilt, and they are the biggest in Wales... But many of the old buildings have gone now, and the town is not good for you any longer. There is only the beauty in the windows.³⁸

³⁷ Thomas, Dylan, 1978, p. 83.

³⁸ 'Glass', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

As the city was rebuilt, an attempt was made to move away from terraced housing, narrow streets that had retained their medieval feel, and the profusion of small street-corner pubs. For Don, and many other residents, this meant the growth of a bland, soulless centre to the city. Gone also were the corner pubs and jazz clubs (home to the likes of the 'Kardomah Gang', the alternative thinkers, voices and artists) and the warren of dockland terraces that had given the town vibrancy during the twenties and thirties. So, though it may lack the scale of the modernist capitals, the Swansea of 'Ugly Lovely' has the feel of a place being made anew, being a place where the centre is always just around the corner, always out of reach.

The modern/ist sense of alienation, of isolation and of distance from the place in which one lives one's life, is echoed in 'Ugly Lovely' through the Bohemian sailor's comment above, and through Don's frequent observations. In 'Quick One', early in the story sequence, Don registers the lost character of Swansea, and projects the anonymity, blandness and modern sameness onto a group of

. . . suits, a mass of dark blue and grey, with smart overnight cases, down from Reading, Swindon, or somewhere just as foreign. Out they come, steady steps, gazing through the twilight for the rank, not uncertain, but deliberate, methodical, getting their bearings in this one city that's just like all the others they pitch up in three or four times a week.³⁹

The sense of sameness, of soullessness about modern Swansea is echoed by or for many other passengers, though the extent and reliability of what Don hears, the ways the feelings are expressed, is generally conditioned by their levels of

³⁹ 'Quick One', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

alcohol consumption and their correspondent disappointment and bitterness. In 'Glass', Don reflects on the mixture of both:

There's a sort of thing that some of them say last thing, on the way back from a night looking for the heart of it and finding it gone long ago, never there or impossible to find. It moves out of their grasp, it's always one street, one club, one bar, one girl or one boy away. Always out of bloody reach.

The more pissed and disenchanted they get, the more the heart of the thing tempts and escapes them. Usually it goes that kind of way: it's not the way it was, it's all gone, all spoiled, and no-one knows like them... Half a bottle of rum to tip into the drinks under the table gets them bleary, but the steady drip of bile from the inside gives it flavour and strength and starts to bite after a while. They're in the back there, trying not to loll too much on the bends, trying not to focus too hard on the moving town, stinking of drink they've paid for with next week's money and bloated with disappointment they actually took with them; they often go home like that.⁴⁰

The passengers give voice to (or are seen to act in ways that give clear indications of) their individual experiences and feelings, but also they give voice to the common experience, to the bleakness of life in communities blighted by long economic decline and soulless, anonymous modern swirl in this passage. So, the passengers who have spent the night 'looking for the heart of it and finding it gone long ago' never there or impossible to find are, in Don's eyes, the many, the mass, the people of the modern city of Swansea.

As Don says:

that's what every last one of them is after on Friday and Saturday nights, searching for the centre of things. All dressed up in their best Primark and Top Man, newly lacquered or gelled, they're off in high spirits to find the centre of things. Confident, bubbling over, free to be someone else after a week on the checkouts or changing tyres on someone else's company car. And they usually end up in *Bloomers* and then the kebab shop with half their wages gone.⁴¹

⁴⁰ 'Glass', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁴¹ 'Fallen', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

And in Don's bitter observation we find an echo of concerns from a key modernist text concerned almost entirely with the ways that people make their way in a city in the thrall of rapid and seemingly incomprehensible growth. . In the opening of John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, we find Bud Korpenning, a raw and naïve immigrant to the city of New York. Vulnerable and eager, but entirely bemused by the scale and apparent incomprehensibility of the city before him, he turns to a fellow passenger on the Brooklyn ferry and asks:

'Say, friend, how fur is it into the city from where the ferry lands?'

A 'cocky' fellow passenger engages:

'That depends on where you want to get to.'

'How do I get to Broadway? . . . I want to get to the centre of things.'

'Walk east a block and turn down Broadway and you'll find the centre of things if you walk far enough.'⁴²

And we see Bud time and again, crossing and re-crossing streets behind the other major characters of the novel, always hunting, and never finding the centre of things. Our final image is of his suicide, jumping from a bridge into the Hudson.

Bud Korpenning's story beyond those early lines where he seeks the 'centre of things' becomes a little more than a silent background to the life and movement of the city of New York in dos Passos's novel. The moment of his death is treated incidentally by Dos Passos, accounting for a few lines of text, and principally seen through the puzzled eyes of a ship's pilot on the river. (It is a moment that sets the ground for Auden, a decade later, to reflect on how

⁴² Dos Passos, John, 1986, pp. 16-17.

'someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along' while Icarus' unimportant failure occurs.)⁴³

In 'Ugly Lovely', as in the passages quoted above, Don gives consistent voice to the plight of the twenty-first century Buds. In addition to those passages above, for example, we find incidental references throughout the work to unnamed characters washed up on the cityscape. In 'Off the Vine', Don describes the city centre shopping mall, which is the:

Same sort of place as anywhere else in the whole UK: a nice high roof so the background music and announcements can echo and be indecipherable, fake marble floor and all the chain shops set out in a V-shape, or a criss-cross, or a loop. In the middle, wherever the arms of the arcade intersect, there'll be a seating area where local garages display cars or the local charities collect, and a load of seats or benches where the sad, the mad, the lost and the lonely hang out, day after day. And when they get fed up with the Quadrant, or get moved on, they can drift across to the bus station, without even having to step outdoors.⁴⁴

For Don, the presence of such people as inhabit the intersection, the nexus, of this representation of modernity is constant, and something that wears him down. 'Ugly Lovely', perhaps unlike dos Passos's work does register discontent, does seek a resolution, and this occurs when Don articulates and enacts his rejection of the alienating life of the city taxi driver.

The modernists' concern for incidentality, for the passage of things by each other without reference, for the complete indifference of the world to private and intense moments of suffering within a modern city environment finds echoes throughout 'Ugly Lovely'. Often, this indifference and incidentality is played out, for example, as Don passes by groups on the street, or in sharper

⁴³ Auden, W. H. 'Musée des Beaux Arts', 1938.

⁴⁴ 'Off the Vine', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

and more protracted focus, as he touches incidentally on the lives of passengers like Mr and Mrs Griffiths.

At the close of the chapter 'The Small Couple', Don hears of Mr Griffiths' death, and attends his cremation. Five people are there:

The vicar said some bland but comforting things about a man he'd never heard of till five days ago, and the five mourners mumbled their way through two tuneless Welsh hymns and fingered the cheap cardboard order of service. The coffin slid smoothly behind the curtains. And when it was over, we wandered towards the other door of the chapel, had our hands pumped by the vicar, and on out into the sunlight . . . striding back up the drive against the flow of cars and mourners arriving for the next cremation.

"Well Don, love, he's gone now," Mrs Griffiths said.

And the sister said:

"We'll have to move the car, Megan, they need the space now,"⁴⁵

Don dumbly registers the events, and moves mechanically through the scene. The nullity of Mr Griffiths' death – and the transitory nature of his mark on life, is further emphasised by the closing moments of the chapter:

Three weeks later I got a message from the girls. She'd rung and, no, she didn't need to speak to me, but would they let me know, would they pass on a message? She'd sold the van, and was going to Porth to be with her sister. It's what he would've wanted.⁴⁶

The matter-of-factness, the unemotional quality of the message relayed at second or third-hand to Don, is reflective of the distance between individuals the, 'attitude of detachment' and 'feeling of alienation and loneliness' identified by Richard Sheppard and Maurice Bebe as key concerns of those rendering experiences of modernity, discussed above. In this chapter of 'Ugly Lovely', a

⁴⁵ 'The Small Couple', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁴⁶ 'The Small Couple', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

life has passed, but the great movement of modernity, the buying and selling of objects, the movement of people, drowns entirely the tiny noise of individual voice – the unimportant failure of a 'small' man like Mr Griffiths.

A particularly intense registering of the incidentality treated through a modern/ist narrative occurs at the close of 'Glass', when the Bohemian sailor Don drove to the city centre earlier in the evening lies dead on a pavement. Don had experienced the presence of the man very intensely, and with a rich symbolism, through breath, smell, intonation as the car moved towards town – and the Bohemian's death, through the rainy Swansea night.

To emphasise the waste in the death, the cutting off of something with a significance, with a history, the sailor, as we have heard, is given a deep and historic connection with Swansea. He tells Don:

...my father, he was here most of his life, and I was here till six years. He came here from our home in Bohemia to work, after the war, after the town had been destroyed here. He was a craftsman in glass. He helped your people build the glass works in the town and he stayed ten years to run it for you. He made the windows for the St Mary church that was rebuilt, and they are the biggest in Wales. They are fine glass. Very beautiful for you.⁴⁷

But, in stark contrast to the richness and history of the sailor's life, and set against the very considerable mass of his living self, the moments of the Bohemian's death are presented in strongly modernist terms, fleeting, incidental, just a sideshow to the wet Friday night in this small-ish Welsh city:

Patrol cars stopped across the road and an ambulance up on the pavement, eerie blue splashed on the wet walls. Not much of a crowd,

⁴⁷ 'Glass', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

just a few swaying folk from the clubs, watching till the rain got inside their jackets, then wandering off for kebabs and cabs.⁴⁸

Modernist approaches also serve to give the narrative/narratives some purchase on the paradox of Don's intimate connection with, and physically close proximity to, his passengers, set against his spiritual separateness, his sense of disconnection, and existential isolation from those who get in and out of his car.

In the most direct and simple sense, Donno's job as a taxi driver itself presents the hallmarks of modernist experience and narrative. Passengers get in the car, are in rare and close physical proximity to their driver, engaging for the duration of the journey in an intimate, special encounter, yet, as Don observes more than once, 'it's not really important'. He is close to them but separate, intimate, yet closed, guarded, watchful.

The intimacy, yet transitory nature of the cab ride is a modern phenomenon, accentuating the modern/ist paradox of the hordes of city-based, intimate, proximate strangers, those who as Spears suggests, experience 'discontinuity',⁴⁹ and as Brazill identifies, feel 'the ever-present threat of chaos... in conjunction with the sense of search'.⁵⁰ Taxis with driver and passenger inside together are a modern, early twentieth-century phenomenon that could only flourish with the development of the production-line for the building of affordable motor cars. Required also for the motor-taxis' success was the building of relatively wide and decently paved streets through densely populated urban areas in which lived a population who had sufficient income to

⁴⁸ 'Glass', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁴⁹ Spears, *op. cit.*, p. 20; also Wilde, Alan, 1981, pp.16, 19.

⁵⁰ Brazill, William J. Jr., 'Art and the "Panic Terror"', in Chapple, G., & Schulte, Hans, H. (Eds.), 1981, pp. 529-39, pp. 531-3.

afford cab fares at least occasionally. With the rise of the motor, as opposed to hansom, horse-drawn cab, the taxi-ride became the preserve not of the wealthy few, but the newly affluent, modern, urban many. The growth in motor-cab numbers and activity mirrors and is dependent upon the growth of the cities that so captivated the early modernist writers.

Frequently, the passengers - male and female, assume a conversational openness that may be regarded as intimate. When, for instance, we hear of the first engagement between Don and Mr and Mrs Griffiths in 'The Small Couple', there is an immediate intimacy established:

... as if he'd just woken to the fact that he was waiting for something, Mr Griffiths suddenly switched on, pointed at me, and led Mrs Griffiths forward towards me.

"Oh, hullo, Boy," he said, touching my arm lightly. "Here we are." You get called all sorts things, some friendly, some formal, some kindly, some plain rude, but it's not really important. 'Drive' was pretty much the most common, but 'Boy' and, less often; 'Boyo', I had a lot. Often, if they were regulars or I was taking them on a long run, they'd ask my name and it'd be Don. But 'Boy' was okay now...⁵¹

Don takes the couple only a short distance, but, as is common for him, they begin to open up, to

...tell me that they were only in town because Mrs Griffiths had bought some material for a dress the previous week and it was marked, so they had to take it back, and she was nervous on her own, so Mr Griffiths had gone too, but the lady in Haberdashery had been fine because it was part of a faulty batch so lots of people had been back too, and they could've swapped, but she couldn't see anything else she liked, so they had the credit note instead.⁵²

⁵¹ 'The Small Couple', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁵² "The Small Couple", in Ugly Lovely'.

These are, as the chapter header tells us, 'small' people, their lives bounded by insecurities and perturbations; they are all right as long as ladies from haberdashery are accepting, as long as they are in amongst the 'lots of people' who give them accord, anonymity and security. (Of course, in the later chapter, 'Fallen', we discover why the couple seek such cover, why their confidence and security is gone.) Despite the timidity of these people, they instantly trust Don, and tell him things about themselves.

In 'United', we have a clear example of the ways that intimacies open and boundaries break down quickly in the taxicab environment, in this case despite what are considerable age and cultural differences between driver and passenger. The elderly south American 'gent', is first picked up from the railway station in 'Steady Now'. He is in Don's cab 'a few times over the next week or two' as he hunts for a home to buy in the wealthy western suburbs of Swansea. As Don tells us:

'...I picked up the grand old gent from the Marlborough a few times over the next week or two, and I got to know him quite well. He was relaxed and warm, got me to call him Luis, but for some reason I felt better calling him Mr Rivera – 'Señor' felt a bit too *High Chaparra*⁵³

So relaxed was the passenger that even after the 'few times' that Don had picked him up in a 'week or two', he is comfortable to tell the driver much of his life story, as we hear in the later chapter 'United'.

The reluctance to call Señor Rivera by his first name reflects a politeness and deference on Don's part that allows us to glimpse perhaps the sensitivity which makes him such a good observer, and which makes him feel so intensely

⁵³ 'United', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

the decadence and rough edges of his society. Don's wisecrack about *High Chaparral*, demonstrates a wry comic spirit, the Welsh love of linguistic connectivities, the tendency towards the baroque in expression, which can lead ultimately of course to the 'Roaring Boy' outcomes of Dylan Thomas's language use.

In 'Into the Light', Don casually plays with perhaps the most extreme example of the intimate stranger tendency from the story sequence, as he is offered 'business' 'more than once' by the girls from Bala Terrace. This episode provides a very good example of the extension of modernist stranger-intimacy into a moment of transaction, where the most intimate act is bartered in an incidental, matter-of-fact trade that is clearly accepted by Don as just a part of city life:

Got laid last night. Not in the way of business, like – though there have been a few times that's nearly happened. More than once, I took one of the girls from Bala Terrace into town then back home at the end of the night and was offered business instead of the fare. I couldn't really think of a way to spill it to the boss that his fourteen pound fare was in a condom floating around the Bay, so I always turned down the business.⁵⁴

The taxi has strong connections with that other feature of travellers' lives, the hotel room. The hotel room, with its own intense intimacy/anonymity paradox has provided a point of interest for numerous modernists writers. The first major modernist treatment of the hotel room occurs perhaps in Henri Barbusse's *L'Enfer*,⁵⁵ where an unnamed narrator peeps through a hole in his

⁵⁴ 'Into the Light', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁵⁵ Barbusse, Henri, *L'Enfer: Hell* (Trans) Robert Baldick, 1966.

hotel room wall to view first a woman undressing in the adjoining room, then a range of sexual and criminal activity. The narrator is spiritually destroyed by the moment. The reference to hotels and their symbolic modernist significance as places of intimacy yet distance tied to the particular nature of city life echoes through modernist novels and stories, and finds its way even into popular, post-modern culture. This, for example, from the sleeve notes to Moby's 2005 album, *Hotel*:

... hotels fascinate me in that they're incredibly intimate spaces that are scoured every 24 hours and made to look completely anonymous.

People sleep in hotel rooms and cry in hotel rooms and bathe in hotel rooms and have sex in hotel rooms and start relationships in hotel rooms and end relationships in hotel rooms and etc and etc, but yet every time we check into a hotel room we feel as if we're the first guest...we enter a hotel room and it becomes our biological home for a while and then we leave.⁵⁶

The intimacy and clinical cleansing of an hotel room is something Don ponders in the story 'Recount', when he spends his second night with Andrea, the girl he met and first slept with after a drunken night in Swansea centre. This time, instead of Don's flat, the couple end up in a well-known city-centre hotel, The Dragon:

She dozed off, but I couldn't. So, I lay there with the lights off hearing the usual chorus of tarts and twats shrieking their way through the end of a Saturday night outside on the Kingsway. Bins going over, cars beeping, lads growling, girls shrieking and giggling. Sirens in the background. Slow wheeling groups making their way up towards the long slope of Mount Pleasant.

And here was me and Andrea away from them, in our own private space, shut off by the double glazed window, the four floors up, the twenty-four hour reception, breathing the sanitised air that was being

⁵⁶ Moby, Sleeve Notes to *Hotel*, V2 (US) & Mute Records (UK), 2005.

cleaned just for us, for our stay, to take away the smell of our love-making.

Until the next couple the next night.⁵⁷

We hear of hotel rooms and hotels frequently throughout the story sequence, as Don delivers passengers to, or collects from, their doors, and as above when he himself becomes a rare guest in the Dragon Hotel. Status commands the hotel experience and, though clearly not a snob, Don makes judgements about his passengers according to their pick-up or drop-off point.

Señor Rivera, in 'Steady Now', is delivered to the Marlborough Hotel, which represents something for Don that is other than his own and most of his passengers' experiences – wealth. The grandeur of the hotel - and what it says about his passenger, is clear to Don. For him it is simple what the Marlborough means:

. . . new multi-storey place built on the edge of the Marina area, glittering, tall and straight, very posh. So he's got a good few bob then.⁵⁸

As we get to know Don we realise that such judgements are far from moral – they are, rather, based on pure economic evaluation, on the individual's ability to tip.

Visiting business people and wealthy incomers to Swansea are the ones who are able to find comfort and seclusion in their accommodation, and it is these people who stay in the 'glittering, tall and straight' tower of the Marlborough, high above the streets of the town (and, of course, we note the

⁵⁷ 'Recount', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁵⁸ 'Steady Now', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

historic English name of the place). The experiences of the drinkers and clubbers of Swansea, the 'doomed youth' of this story sequence are very different. For them the experience of accommodation means 'a rambling terrace of more or less shabby bed and breakfasts' along Oystermouth Road:

. . . with peeling paint and grey net curtains their stock in trade is copped-off couples booking in late, sweaty after clubs on Friday and Saturday nights. Giggling and nervous, or full of vodka shots and hormones, the lucky couples get a twenty-five pound room, orange swirly carpets, flat-pack furniture, a set of bobbly polyester sheets and a dose of chlamydia all in.⁵⁹

The models for such a character stance are abundant in almost all forms of post-Enlightenment literary work, but it is particularly in the modernist focus on physical closeness/spiritual separation, isolation/overcrowding, in what might be called an intimacy with strangers, that Don's condition resonates. As Malcolm Bradbury points out:

Much modernist art has taken its stance from, gained its perspectives out of, a certain kind of distance, an exiled posture – a distance from local origins, class allegiances, the specific obligations and duties of those with an assigned role in a cohesive culture.⁶⁰

The opening of the work places us with Donno, in a world where windscreen wipers tick the minutes away, where much of his working life is spent in queues – at stations, at traffic lights, outside nightclubs and pubs. The contained and constrained nature of Donno's existence is clear, also, in the pervasive atmosphere of the station, and the car in which he spends most of his hours:

Waiting. And more waiting. In the bloody rain at the rank and waiting for the bloody trains. Flipping the wipers for the umpteenth time,

⁵⁹ 'Steady Now', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁶⁰ Bradbury, Malcolm, 'The Cities of Modernism' in Bradbury M., and McFarlane J., (Eds.) 1987, p100.

keeping the engine on for the warmth, smelling the exhaust fumes, the plastic and the damp, and waiting for the punters to appear⁶¹

And, later, we have a sense of Don's frustration, his irritation with the town that keeps him (in both senses). Swansea seems to be losing its way culturally and economically, a tendency reflected metaphorically as well as literally in Don's reflections on the city, which he wryly describes as:

a bit piecemeal, threaded through with one-way systems that always take you past the place you want to get to, whichever way you come from. It's an assortment of slabby car parks, a swathe of muddled bus lanes, some dying independent shops, one successful and two struggling shopping malls.⁶²

Tonally and emotionally such constraints of narrative mirror the environment in which the driver operates. The visual is also highly important to this work. Don experiences people through a small screen, in part, captured fleetingly and in motion, often reversed in his mirror and often moving quickly beyond his gaze, often repetitive or randomly ordered, and he experiences his home city largely through a window, as it goes by.

Much of Don's day is spent filling in cracks, putting together mosaics, painting fuller pictures from fleeting glimpses. Again, we feel the modernist influence. Donno develops life stories, develops drama, happiness, loss, belonging and isolations for the people he sees just briefly as he moves around his city. At the birth of the modernist movement, Baudelaire took the image of the shabby girl spied in Paris streets and cafes of the mid-1840s, dressed and

⁶¹ 'Waiting', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁶² 'Waiting', in 'Ugly Lovely' p 3.

re-dressed her, from rags to ornate and aristocratic finery, then back to rags and ultimately nakedness in 'To a Red-haired Beggar Girl'⁶³.

Don finds lives and dramas for the people he encounters, briefly, with little beauty. Of one elderly couple seen for just a few minutes as they exit the station at which he waits in line, Don constructs a life, and a small tragedy for small people living on the edge of their society:

Old couple then: him carrying the bags, a thin, straining claw around vinyl handles, her following, tired, sheepish in the bustle. What's it been, I wonder? A week at the daughter's in Newport while Tommy's case is heard. He goes down for four, but at least they've been there for her, been there with her, given her the strength to see sense and a solicitor and begin proceedings. Give it a month and she'll be arriving here too, with her life packed up into four cardboard boxes, and beginning all over again, just where it started. Beaten, they shuffle out, with just the energy to get to the line and into Des's cab at the front.⁶⁴

The pathetic quality (in the literal sense) of these imagined lives finds origins in modern writings from a very wide range of sources and nations. The artistic concern to represent the condition of the mass - the ordinary people Don glimpses from his cab - with an artistic and linguistic distance and detachment, yet with an intention (rarely overt) to highlight the want, the vacancy, the distance and tragedy of modern living is a key element of modern urban writing. We find this focus and fascination in works widely divergent in scope and intention, as apparently far apart as Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), and John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). Though vastly different works in stylistic method and aesthetic, they are both

⁶³ The significance of this poem to modernist attempts to record the city experience, especially the yawning gaps between the poor and rich, is treated in Nicholls, P., 1995, in detail on pp. 1-4 and with reference to other works, pp.5-23.

⁶⁴ 'Quick One' in 'Ugly Lovely'.

focussing on modernity, the experience of modernity, and the impact of the modern city experience upon the lives of people who have little or no means to control their environment.

From the former we hear, in what would now be recognised as journalistic or documentary detail, how people on the London streets observe codes, attend to the business of progress without a shared word or contact. They:

...crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd.⁶⁵

Whilst from Dos Passos, we hear of the arrival of the Brooklyn ferry, bringing its new cargo to the gulping machine of New York:

Handwinches whirl with jingle of chains.

Gates fold upwards, feet step out across the crack, men and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press.⁶⁶

Dos Passos' narrative is stylistically innovative, at once poetic and bleak, presenting us with those features identified by Fokkema, & Ibsch and Schwartz and as 'consciousness, observation and detachment',⁶⁷ and 'a commitment to metaphor as the very essence of poetry itself'.⁶⁸ Dos Passos's style is poetic, by turns impressionistic and expressionistic, and very different to Engels's detailed scrutiny of habit and condition, but their aim and message are in keeping. Both

⁶⁵ Engels, J., 1973, p 60.

⁶⁶ Dos Passos, J., 1925, p15.

⁶⁷ Fokkema, D., and Ibsch, E., 1987, pp. 22, 318. p.60.

⁶⁸ Schwartz, S., 1985, pp. 71-74.

writers treat the plight of the ordinary, the unremarkable, and their daily existence in a modern urban setting, and that concern provides a key model and driver for the narrative of 'Ugly Lovely'.

Set against the starkness of this visual framing, are the longer narratives of the passengers and the more lyrical passages in which the driver moves out of his car, away from his job, into the countryside or other countries. These passages provide reflection time for both driver and reader, during which some of the significance of events is considered. In these more poetical sections of 'Ugly Lovely' we find echoes of the aesthetic techniques employed by dos Passos in what are generally referred to as the 'Camera Eye' sections of his depictions of city modernity.

Dos Passos's movement between four distinct narrative methods, explored in the trilogy *USA*, (though utilised also in part across sections of *Manhattan Transfer*, where they lack the full prominence found in *USA*), demonstrate an attempt to render in narrative the shifting nature of representation through the form. The 'Camera Eye' sections of the novel show Dos Passos's concern for the subjective, autobiographical mode, initially set in childhood⁶⁹, or reaching back to childhood in tone and through memory.

We find very close echoes of this technique in 'Ugly Lovely' when for instance Don recounts in 'Across the Water' the moments leading up to and immediately following his father's death:

The headmistress, Miss Gerald came and got me from our classroom just after milk break, and said I was to go with Mrs Todd from next door, and that Mam would see me at the hospital, and that Dad had

⁶⁹ Trotter, D., op. cit., p.79.

been taken a bit poorly and that it would be all right and that I should be a good boy for my Mam. And all the way up to the hospital, I thought he would be sitting in bed in his blue pyjamas, perhaps drinking tomato soup, with a little glass of Lucozade on the side cabinet, like I did when I was ill. But he was dead. And Mam was crying, and Mrs Gerald tried to explain, but I wouldn't listen and when she tried to hug me I pushed her away and ran down the long sloping corridor that ran between the wards, running away from the hug I didn't want, away, just away. And further down, when they were far enough away and I couldn't hear the crying and their voices so loud, I stopped. And I stood right in the middle of the corridor and the world seemed to spin, so I put out both my arms, feeling the whole corridor, and the hospital spinning round and round. And I was standing there like that when Gramps came puffing up the corridor and found me⁷⁰

And, as in dos Passos's attempt to catch through stylistic modulation the voice of childhood, the richness of sensory and impressionistic perception, so Don is given to express his intense emotional response to the event of his father's death through an intense and poetic stylistic moment where the narrative attempts to depict the child Don's experience through simplified syntax and register.

The concern with isolation as a keynote of the modern condition is given further treatment in the narrative stance and stylistic method of the work. In 'Ugly Lovely', though Don plays the role of narrator and provides the links between various sections, and though we are party also to many reflections and inner-monologues, there are many other voices in the story sequence, with a variety of linguistic styles. Here, it is in Faulkner's earlier works that the model for the narrative approach in 'Ugly Lovely' was found. In Faulkner's stripped down monologue-followed-by-monologue structure, the vehicle for 'Ugly Lovely's passenger narratives emerges. As Melvyn J Friedman notes,

⁷⁰ 'Across the Water' in 'Ugly Lovely'.

As I Lay Dying ... proceed[s] through monologues. We move from one mind to another with only minimal stage direction. Faulkner's presentational method in this novel is to print the name of his monolinguist in bold type before we enter his mind . . . There is no room in the structure for Faulkner's own, third-person manoeuvrings, though one does detect his rhetorical presence...⁷¹

'Ugly Lovely' echoes and adapts particularly this element of the narrative method of *As I Lay Dying* - and those similar techniques used again by Faulkner in more complex and challenging fashion in the later *The Sound and the Fury*. True, there is far more than 'minimal stage direction' present in 'Ugly Lovely', but narratorial intrusion is minimized in a number of the sequences, and the work sees a number of almost entirely free-standing monologues woven into the story sequence without great loss of coherence. Two taxi passengers are able to engage in lengthy narratives of their own, controlling time sequences, location, and even adopting a different tone and register for the duration. In 'United', for instance, we hear from Señor Rivera the story of his own early years, and of the emotional triggers that sent him moving around the world for so many years. Don is largely silent, removed during the entire tale and Rivera's voice takes over narrative duty. Donno's guiding and interpretative role is put to one side on these occasions - though, of course, his guidance and interpretative reliability is sometimes doubtful anyway – as he himself points out.

Most of Don's initial impressions are gained from looking at people from waist height, as they approach the car, and many of the tales he hears are cut short by the ending of journeys, or by interventions such as his own radio,

⁷¹ Friedman, Melvyn J, in Bradbury and McFarlane (Eds.) 1987 pp459-461.

passengers' phones or other devices. He hears voices from pavements, sees shoes and suits, sees bags and prams as they approach or move by the car. This approach draws very much on the symbolism of Faulkner's work.

As I Lay Dying exist[s] almost entirely in terms of clusters of images and verbal patterns, and these are the central features in their identification and a primary part of the modernist mode. . . Here [in the novel] for example, Faulkner, concerned with the movement and the formation of consciousness in his primary characters, seems careful to connect most of the members of the Bundren family with a different symbol – we associate Vardaman with a fish, Jewel with a horse, cash with a coffin, Anse with a set of false teeth etc.⁷²

The characters who get in and out of Don's cab are identified partly in symbolist ways.

The Bohemian sailor of 'Glass', becomes reduced to a powerful amalgam of symbolic elements during the drive to town. His density, his apparent ability to absorb light, and his slow, deliberate rolling then placing of an unlit cigarette in his mouth become symbols of his depth, his bulk, solidity (in cultural and spiritual terms), and his patience, as well as pre-figuring his death in symbolic terms:

Just puts it up to his mouth and stops, because that's what he'd started doing. No search for the light, no reaching over me to push the lighter in like some of the ones do who want a fight. Just stops with it unlit in his mouth and settles. Orange flashes now on black space, with a white bar across.

. . .

And later:

He hadn't moved though, not a muscle. He was bang in the middle of the seat and hadn't moved. Orange flash, but just the black and the band of white. The blackness seemed to swallow the neon, soak it up. No penetration, no illumination, just nullity, absorption.

⁷² Friedman, Melvin J., in 'The Symbolist Novel: from Huysmans to Malraux' in Bradbury M., and McFarlane J., (Eds.) 1987, p. 461.

And again:

all of a sudden, he was coming forward, not really leaning forward, not actually moving on the seat, but becoming nearer to me all the same. I couldn't see any of the town or the lights through the mirror out back now, but still I hadn't heard him move on the seat. Orange flashes and blackness, but just blackness in the mirror, with one thin white slash.⁷³

Señor Rivera becomes identified with the beautiful leather case Don first encounters in 'Steady Now', sees again in 'Portable', and ultimately leaves Swansea with in 'One Way'. For Don, the case stands for all that Snr. Rivera is, for the mystery and glamour of his life. He invests the case with a symbolic significance that is beyond its being, that speaks almost as much of his own yearnings as it does of Señor Rivera's life:

I never thought those suitcases actually existed outside a film – box-square, corners double stitched, and weighty things in themselves, even without the stuff inside. Shiny fittings, bound to be brass, oozing quality, talking not just of travel but of *adventure*. That type of case tells its own story, speaks calmly of things far away, far, far away from anything that the rest of us can afford or even hope to. In the old films you see porters pushing around little pyramids of those cases on trolleys, and the cases have stickers all over them, magical names of mysterious places, always far-off, places only reachable by flying boat, or on the Orient Express, or by luxury liner, Amazon steamer, Nile cruiser. Cases like that have been to places that magically stop being there when just anyone like you and me might be able to get there.⁷⁴

The final element of patterning reflective of concerns with modernity that affects 'Ugly Lovely' is drawn from the focus on language, its unreliability and its changeability – to what Levenson above has called 'the recurrent act of fragmenting unities (unities of character or plot or pictorial space or lyric

⁷³ 'Glass', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁷⁴ 'Steady Now', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

form)).⁷⁵ For Don, the language of his passengers presents puzzles, not simply in terms of accent or dialect, but in terms of the users' attempts to control, harness and manipulate language in their presentation of self. Part of Don's fascination for his work lies in the decoding, the deconstruction of their language puzzles. Here, perhaps, Don could be said to be engaging with what Pericles Lewis terms the hermeneutics of suspicion:

The stream of consciousness, while purporting to represent the surface activity of the consciousness seems to invite a 'suspicious' reading that can uncover the hidden unconscious mental processes inaccessible to the consciousness of the fictional character. Faced with a hermeneutics of suspicion, authors often became more indirect, hiding their meanings so as to force the interpreter to work harder. Joyce boasted of *Ulysses* that "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality".⁷⁶⁷⁷

Don feels the mortality, emasculation of many of his male passengers, their neutering by economic and social forces. Masculinity, once defined by work and working community, has been eroded for numerous of the men Don picks up – whether it be Mr Griffiths, whose entire being is eroded by economic desperation and subsequent failure, or the squaddie picked up 'Nicely' and 'Off the Vine'. This passenger comes originally from Swansea, has served twelve years, but has now bought himself out of the Army. He thinks he is returning home to marry his girlfriend and settle. Don first meets him off the train that brings him back to town, then a month or two later as he leaves, to return to barracks, the relationship having failed. Don notes the way language is used flexibly when he first picks up the squaddie. Talking to mates on the station

⁷⁵ Levenson, M., (Ed.), 2011, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Ellmann, Richard, 1983, p. 521.

⁷⁷ Lewis, Pericles, 2007, p. 18.

concourse, the soldier is part of a group, full of aggression and bravado. He observes that 'they were threatening, plastering the air with words, wearing them like a gun and flak jacket', but as he settles in the car the young man's expression shifts:

. . . he spoke as if she was in the car, gently. He wasn't talking to me really, but to her. He was rehearsing himself, putting himself into the right character to bring her round, to convince her he was worth it.⁷⁸

But, later, in 'Off the Vine' we see the soldier again, his relationship failed; he has no job and no prospects in Swansea, the place where he was born. Don feels he 'stabs at me' with language, and notes how the squaddie has

I realised as we crossed the green and turned into his road that he'd got no object for his speech – it didn't matter that I was here really, he's turned his words, snarling, on himself. I wasn't frightened of this; it was self-harm really.⁷⁹

As well as the way words wrap his passengers often without their awareness, Don is conscious of the ways that games are played with words – the hermeneutic game playing - both by the customers over his shoulder and by himself. He is experienced and cynical enough to moderate and adapt his expression, to let words mean different things to different passengers. In 'Glass', he muses on how he becomes the voice for the disgruntled, disappointed punters on the sodden journeys home from a thousand and one unsuccessful nights out:

... it brings us together against the common enemy, the bastards in suits, the rule-makers, box-tickers and finers. Once they're in the car, and warmed up a bit, it's usually okay as long as we all understand that

⁷⁸ 'Nicely', in *Ugly Lovely*.

⁷⁹ 'Off the Vine', in *Ugly Lovely*.

it's Them Out There whose rules that are fucking Us Up In Here. I'm on your side pal, I'm the best mate you've not found all evening, and unfortunately neither of us can have a fag really, neither of us have got off with anyone all night, both of us have just spent a month's money on pissey beer, and neither of us have got any money left for next week either. So, it's not my fault and I'm as crushed as you. But that's it, shove the broken fag back in the crumpled packet, nod off, don't throw up and I'll call you when we get there. I'm saying your words for you because you can't. Tidy.

And, the voices the punters adopt in their sober and considered moments are also flexible, used to advantage and to present a variety of selves.

Happens a lot, that voice thing. They get in, loud from the pub, the club or the canteen, and they're locked into the voice that's been working best for them, the one that's given them a place, belonging, protection. It usually lasts for a few miles and then, if they're on their own, the coating drops away and they forget to dress for company. They get to sound more and more like their real selves. Posh, foreign, common, soft, tired, whatever it is they've got to cover up when they're out there. Until they arrive, and then the lacquer is applied in seconds, the fare's dealt with in the finished voice and they're off again.⁸⁰

And, Don is a manipulator of both speech and meaning throughout the story sequence, so that we recognise his skills in the passages above, but are left less certain, less able to interpret and derive meaning at other times. In the story 'Stroke' language use is the chief feature that identifies the Dutch couple Don drives around. Their curious, complicit language use fascinates and charms him:

And, what I liked best about them was the way that they talked as a pair. He'd usually do the opening, a statement, set the scene, but she'd follow up with a question on the same point half a second later. It was a bit of a double act, as if they were trying to gather information, to research you as they talked. So, often, as they got in the car, on the gentle golden-sunny autumn mornings that we had for the whole two weeks they were here, from him it'd be something like:

⁸⁰ 'Glass', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

"Hello Dhoneld, it is a fine day now for us."

Then quick as a flash, with a lean forward from the back, she'd purr:

"Yes, fine. But, here, do you have such days a lot?"⁸¹

On one trip with the couple, Don tells them a story handed down from his grandfather – whose unreliability has already been identified in earlier chapters. The story about the swimming pig is clearly largely a fabrication, but has a gentle charm. At its close, Don leaves us uncertain of the reliability of his narrative.

They liked the story, and he laughed so much he nearly lost a wader in the silt. But, before we'd finished chuckling down by the water, from up on the grass a question floated down, all silky smooth:

"But Dhoneld, did you not know, in fact, the pigs, they swim so well?"

Yes. Yes, I did know. Always had really.⁸²

The reader is left to wonder whether Don has adopted the unreliable traits of his grandfather here, particularly with the earlier 'it's not really important' remark hanging above the text.

⁸¹ 'Stroke', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

⁸² 'Stroke', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

Inherent in the method of 'Ugly Lovely', and further shaping the stylistics of the work is the assumption that the narrative/s delivered by Don and his passengers are heard as much as read. The reader has a privileged position as a confidante of Don, at times occupying a space inside the cab, next to the driver, at others, being party to the passengers' own comments and tales, and occupying a bystander's position in a setting commanded by the passenger/secondary narrator. The setting of the work in south Wales permits and supports a form that draws on the tradition of Welsh oratory, on the Anglo-Welsh strength in short fiction, and on the wider traditions of tale-sequences so significant in Welsh language literature.⁸³

That a short story form is appropriate for the matter of 'Ugly Lovely' – matter that concerns itself with the city, the urban experience and the intimacy/solitude paradox already discussed, is summed up in a comment by G. K. Chesterton. His comments were written at the start of the twentieth century, but they speak for much later modern and post-modern work.

Our attraction to short stories is not an accident of form; it is the sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility; it means that existence is only an illusion. A short story today has the air of a dream; it has the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood. . . The moderns, in a word, describe life in short stories because they are possessed with the sentiment that life is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one.⁸⁴

Additionally, the short-story form has been a prominent and successful feature of Welsh writing in English for nearly a century. As Tony Brown notes:

While the poetic tradition is at the heart of Welsh writing in both languages, it is striking how frequently and how successfully English

⁸³ See for treatment of the short story focus of much Welsh writing in English: Brown, Tony, 'The Ex-centric Voice: The English-language Short Story in Wales', 2001 pp.25-29.

⁸⁴ Chesterton, G., K., 2011, p.77.

language writers in Wales have chosen to express themselves in the form of the short story. After poetry, the short story is their major form of expression.⁸⁵

Brown goes on to ascribe a number of relatively prosaic and practical reasons for this phenomenon. First, he suggests that the linguistic concentration of short stories, being closely approximated to that in poetry, may give a sympathy to the form for Welsh writers in English steeped, perhaps even unknowingly in the oral and literary traditions of the Welsh language culture. Second, he notes the fact that many Welsh writers in English are part-time writers, with many teachers, university academics, doctors and other professionals writing alongside their day-jobs. The simple brevity of form, he argues, may account for the story – or story sequence – being easier to undertake than a novel. Third, Brown suggests that the presence of a number of Welsh magazines regularly publishing stories (*Wales, The Welsh Review*), as well as London based magazines, particularly during wartime paper shortages, meant that such a route for publication was appealing. But, Brown also develops throughout his article an argument that the short story as a form has a deeper more intrinsic appeal, in its affinity with the ex-centric, the outsider, the marginal voice.

Quoting from Frank O'Connor's early work on the form, Brown argues that the story appeals to

... an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups whatever these may be at any given time – tramps, artists, lonely dreamers, and spoiled priests. The novel can still adhere to the classic concept of a civilised society . . . but the short story remains by its very

⁸⁵ Brown, Tony, 2001, p.25.

nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic intransigent.⁸⁶

Certainly, when one considers the work of great writers in the short story form as disparate as Flannery O'Connor, Paul Bowles, Charles Bukowski, Gogol, Robert Graves, and Balzac, there is an outsider's quality, an otherness, whether derived from speaking of and for marginalised groups or by treating lives lived and worked in the margins, whether societal or geographical. In Welsh fiction in English, the short story writers who stand out equally occupy those margins; Rhys Davies for example, wrote both novels and stories, but as Glyn Jones and John Rowlands identify, Davies excels in the concentrated shorter form:

Fine as are Rhys Davies's novels, it is his short stories that many readers will see as his highest achievement. The novel usually demands development of character and an understanding of the forces at work in a society in which those characters live and work. The short story, on the other hand can be entirely effective without exploring the relations of its character to the forms which the society in which they live has taken. . .

⁸⁷

Jones and Rowlands identify in part the threads of Brown's argument, but pass by the marginality of Davies' work. It is surely one of the qualities of Davies' work to explore the gaps, the disjunctions between character and society, rather than what sounds like a suggestion by Jones and Rowlands that Davies suffered an inability to deal with the relations between characters and their society – simply because his characters frequently have no such relation. The characters are other - 'submerged' as Frank O'Connor has it - and therefore have none of the interactions which might encourage, or permit exploration of

⁸⁶ O'Connor, Frank 1963, p. 20-21.

⁸⁷ Jones, Glyn & Rowlands, John, 1980, p 251.

connectivity. The story discussed by Jones and Rowlands, 'Blodwen' demonstrates entirely this point though Jones and Rowlands don't identify the strand in Davies' work. The named central character Blodwen casts off the security and 'normality' of married life with the solicitor Vaughan, to run off with the outsider, the gipsy figure Pugh. This arises not simply because of a Lawrentian urge, or physically driven action, but is an act based on the otherness of both characters. Blodwen is as much an outsider as Pugh himself, but has been constrained, crushed and marginalised for most of her life. Another of Rhys Davies' finest stories, 'Canute' though generally seen as comic and light, treats the notion of separateness, otherness. The marooned Rowland does not care for the pressures of his fellows, nor for the tattle of pit communities, but his wife does; she conforms, she fears and engages with public opinion and suffers as a result.

Davies' personal history fits well with Brown's argument: Davies was to some extent an outsider, even to his own community of Welsh writers in English. He left Wales early and inhabited the margins of London literary life, existing first on casual work, then by his pen, publishing in the more *avant garde*, marginal, magazines and journals. He was from a relatively affluent family, not miners or industrial workers, but shop-owners: at once, he was as Brown says, 'in a Welsh working class community, but not quite of it.'⁸⁸ And, of course, in the nineteen twenties and thirties Davies struggled because he belonged to that hugely marginalised group, gay men. He never took up academic writing, never engaged in reviewing or really played a part in the

⁸⁸ Brown, T., 2001, p. 32.

more academic and critical aspect of Welsh literature in English. As Jones and Rowlands acknowledge, 'in this, he was probably unique among Anglo-Welsh [*sic*] writers'. As they point out, even in his treatment of the topics familiar to many Welsh writers in English of the thirties and Forties, industrial strife, poverty, the degradation of pit and industrial communities of the Rhondda and other valleys, Davies has a different approach, that of a detached observer, often giving an alternative, view, from an-other perspective.

The linguistic challenge facing the Welsh writer in English is clear: s/he

...is doubly marginalised. He or she is not English, not writing in the English literary tradition. . . . But the chances are that he or she will not be Welsh speaking; aware of the rich and continuing cultural heritage in the Welsh language, he or she will be shut out from it. In the words of Harri Webb, the Welsh writer in English is 'caught between two languages' and two cultural traditions.⁸⁹

Thus, the short story form appeals to the writer who seeks to capture the matter between the mainstreams. And, such a perspective is not in any respect a recent phenomenon. Reid⁹⁰ and March-Russell⁹¹ note the almost unbroken presence of tales in Eurasian culture since the third millennium BC. In those tales and tale-sequences, there is a strong strain of otherness, of being stuck between the prevailing and the counter culture, both for the characters in the framing narratives and the characters and tellers of the tales themselves. Scheherazade, in *One Thousand and One Nights* is existing, literally, by her wits, her guile – clearly the trait of the outsider-survivor. She is powerless, a

⁸⁹ Brown, T., 2001, p. 27.

⁹⁰ Reid, I., 1977, see chapter 2.

⁹¹ March-Russell, P., 2009, pp. 5-7.

woman in the royal court of the absolute ruler, Shahryār. She has to preserve her life through good tale telling. In such outsider tales, there is a clear line of descent reaching towards 'Ugly Lovely' and other short stories and story sequences, and stretching back through to the earliest story sequences written. In all of these works, we have not only a group of tales, but the positioning of those tales within a wider, framing narrative. In the latter two works, there are clearly models which are applied in 'Ugly Lovely'.

G. H. McWilliam in his introduction to the 1995 translation of *The Decameron*⁹² discusses the framed tale structure (which he refers to as a 'boxed' structure), in the following terms:

Much critical attention has been focused in recent years on the Decameron's structure, and many elaborate and ingenious theories about it have been given an airing, but in essence what the reader is presented with is a threefold structural scheme. The three levels on which the Decameron works could be defined, for the sake of clarity, as the world of the author, the world of the narrators, and the world of the narratives.⁹³

This is a structural analysis which applies equally to 'Ugly Lovely'. We can identify: the 'world' of Don, involving his family tales and the observations he makes between fares and during the sections of the story sequence concerned with his own life; the 'world' of the passengers, involving the events and actions within the passengers' own narratives (for example in Señor Rivera's 'United', or the tale told by Sheena in 'And Again'); finally, the world of the narratives themselves, such as Kev's telling of Mr and Mrs Griffiths' story in 'Fallen', or the squaddie's account of his domestic life in 'In'. The model works to give the story

⁹² Boccaccio, G., (trans McWilliam, G. H.), 1995, p. lxi – lxii.

⁹³ Boccaccio, G., (trans McWilliam, G. H.), 1995, p. lxi.

sequence a number of layers in which to treat its subjects, and as already discussed, allows a degree of narrative uncertainty and ambiguity to be developed within the work.

For more modern models, the work of Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters provide useful templates. In Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*,⁹⁴ the two-hundred and six character portraits and potted life-stories are all loosely linked by the fact that they are set in a small Illinois community, and the narrators expound their tales from their graves. Chiefly, the unity of the work lies in its moral and psychological focus. As Malcolm Bradbury says:

The small town is here no place of virtue or moral strength; these are tales of meaningless marriages, accidents and disease, unsung songs of individual ineptitude and economic exploitation.⁹⁵

The small-town concentration, and the intention to unpick something of the fabric of Spoon River through a multitude of voices offers an appealing model for application to the Swansea of the late twentieth century, as treated in 'Ugly Lovely'. Though a 'smallish city' not a small town, the Swansea of 'Ugly Lovely' has plenty of provincial narrowness, plenty of 'unsung songs of individual ineptitude and economic exploitation', when one thinks of the squaddie of 'Nicely', 'Off the Vine', or of Mr Griffiths of 'The Small Couple' and 'Fallen', or even in a more light-hearted vein, of the presentation of Gramps as a young boy with his mates in 'Stroke'.

However, perhaps the most useful modern model for the story sequence lies in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*⁹⁶. This collection of 26 stories is

⁹⁴ Masters, E., Lee., 2008.

⁹⁵ Ruland, R. and Bradbury, M., 1992, pp. 281-282.

framed both by location in the small Ohio town of Winesburg, and by the presence of a unifying narrator figure, George Willard. Though *Winesburg Ohio* is set in a small town in the developing mid-west at the start of the twentieth century, Blanche Gelfant situates Anderson's tale sequence firmly within the modernist city novel group:

The themes of personal dissociation and the failure of love, as they are organic to modern city fiction, are fundamental to Sherwood Anderson's novels. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson developed these themes against the setting of the small town – although he had found the actual prototypes for the grotesque characters of Winesburg in a rooming house in Chicago.⁹⁷

So, *Winesburg, Ohio*, despite its setting, deals with concerns entirely relevant to the 'smallish' city setting of 'Ugly Lovely'. Both works consider the plight of individuals, particularly lost, mis-directed individuals caught somewhere in the void of what Anderson called 'lonely intimacy' that both small town and urban life can generate. In the small town and smallish city too, there are the similarities in both communities' relations to bigger, more cosmopolitan communities that have a strong presence in characters' lives and minds. In 'Ugly Lovely', Don frequently refers to Cardiff in terms that suggest its dominance, predominance and first-city status. Early in the work's first chapter, we hear that Swansea is

... nearly two hours into Wales from the Severn Bridge, an hour and a bit west of, and, some say, ten years behind, Cardiff. Poor old Swansea...⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Anderson, Sherwood, 1976 (originally published 1919).

⁹⁷ Gelfant, Blanche, H., 1970, p. 96.

⁹⁸ 'Waiting' in 'Ugly lovely'.

For George Willard and the other inhabitants of Winesburg, it is Cleveland, the county seat and second city of the state that looms large and provides glimpses of cosmopolitan life. We hear for instance of the entire community's pride in

... Wesley Moyer's bay stallion, Tony Tip, that had won the two-fifteen trot at the fall races in Cleveland.⁹⁹

The latest fashions, tools, domestic furniture and implements come into Paris's Dry Goods Store, from Cleveland, in the same way that for Don cosmopolitan passengers, goods, fashions come down the M4 or off the railway line from Cardiff. And, looming above the Clevelands and Cardiffs of both works are the more distant capital cities of London and Columbus referenced with some distrust in both works.

Like Don in 'Ugly Lovely', George Willard in Winesburg is hunting for himself, searching for the thing that will make him complete, meaningful. At the close of the work, his mother having died, Willard boards a train for Chicago. Throughout the collection, we find tales partly narrated by George Willard, partly by characters themselves, and some focus on Willard's life and emotional development. The parallels are clear. Don has also lost his father and his mother, but during the story sequence, the significant loss is his grandfather, with whom he has an ambivalent relationship. Don moves from a sexually repressed figure (we learn of his difficulties through the story 'Into the Light' which looks back to a significant early relationship) to one more comfortable with himself and Andrea, with whom it is suggested he will retain connection as the book closes. Finally, Don - like Willard - realises that to become the person

⁹⁹ From 'Hands' in Anderson, Sherwood, 1976, p. 29.

he feels he should be, he must leave his home city, and he too boards a train in the final scene of the book.

The short story clearly has a central place in Welsh writing in English, and represents one of its most popular and critically and commercially recognised forms. It seems fitting that the birth of what was initially known as 'Anglo-Welsh literature' came early in the twentieth century with Caradoc Evans' stories collected in *My People* (1915) – a work which drew its energy as well as its commercial success from attacking rather than exploring the culture within which it was based. Set in the fictional west Wales town of Manteg, Evans' stories were lacerating in their presentation of the non-conformist, rural community aiming to project an outward propriety and dignity, but manifesting daily a gross hypocrisy, greed, and narrowness. (Following *My People* with *Capel Sion* (1916), and *My Neighbours* (1919), Evans repeatedly tapped into the clear fascination for such work amongst English audiences. In Wales, of course, Evans became known as the country's 'most hated man'.)

Evans maintained a spare and tight expression, which works very effectively within the short story form; additionally, the tales are almost entirely devoid of authorial comment or moral observation. Evans' use, also, of modern English and the English of the King James Bible, peppered with half-digested Welsh phrases gives the stories much of what Tony Brown recognises as 'profound intuitions of marginalization, of loneliness, and detachment, or at best an ambiguous relation to the culture and society that surrounds ... [him]'

For the short story set in Wales (as perhaps for Welsh writing in English itself), there has been a maturation that has seen the place of the story as a

means to explore, celebrate and record Welsh culture and experience, confirmed and even enhanced since Caradoc Evans time. Amongst audiences, such material is clearly popular. The short story now is not

... restricted to the cultural experience, the shocks and displacements, of previous generations. Welsh writers in English, it is evident, still find the short story a natural mode in which to express their experiences of contemporary Wales. This is certainly suggested by the fact that four anthologies of new short stories have been published since 1994, including the recent volume ... from Parthian which contains fifty-five stories in its 500-plus pages.¹⁰⁰

As we have noted above, in 1915 Caradoc Evans published his scathing fictional account of life in a rural Cardiganshire village. The publication was a triumphant yet enormously painful moment for Welsh writers in English. The publication of *My People*, followed by two other short story prose collections of the same ilk, and a little later, a play titled *Taffy*, marked the birth of what was then called Anglo-Welsh literature. The fact of that birth did not receive serious treatment or recognition by the Welsh academic and literary communities (then almost indistinguishable) until the mid-nineteen fifties, and continues to be contested today.

The triumph in Evans' publication of *My People* comes from the bare fact that he sold many, many copies of his work. And, throughout England especially, it was seen, and accepted, that a Welsh writer might write and publish successfully in English. The concomitant pain arises from Evans' writing

¹⁰⁰ Brown, Tony 2001, p.40. [The volume Brown refers to is Davies, L., & Smith A., (Eds.), 1999].

because such sales were based on the creation of grotesques and caricatures, in place of the real people of Wales¹⁰¹.

That such a distorted vision satisfied an English (and to a lesser extent, American) taste for parodic and carnivalesque treatments of other nations is amply demonstrated by the variety of such depictions rattling through English literary, theatrical and popular culture in the twentieth century. The Welsh could be contained as funny little people with strange linguistic habits and endearing nicknames in exactly the same ways that Black Americans could be reduced to cutely entertaining boot-blackened minstrels in the hands of the BBC from 1958 to 1978. Gwyn Jones summed up the co-existent pain and release brought about by Evans' work:

The present world began just forty years ago, with the publication of *My People* in 1915, a book which for Welshmen added a final horror to war as surely as *My Neighbours* in 1919 and *Taffy* in 1923 robbed them of the peace that should have followed . . .¹⁰²

It seemed to Jones so clear that Evans had brought about a birth as well as an infliction of pain, yet there was – and still is, a strong lobby within the Welsh-speaking literary community who did not/does not fully accept the validity of the concept of Anglo-Welsh writing. Most famously, Saunders Lewis set out the early arguments when he delivered his lecture 'Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?', to the guild of graduates at Cardiff in December 1938. In his opening sentence, he sets his stall:

¹⁰¹ Tomos Owen has written an interesting essay exploring the nature of grotesques, and the possible Dickensian and music-hall origins of Evans' characters. See, Owen, Tomos, 'From Slum to Capel Sion: The Early Fiction of Caradoc Evans and the Prehistory of "Anglo-Welsh Literature"', in Gramich, Katie (Ed.), 2012, pp.121-150.

¹⁰² Jones, Gwyn, 1957, p. 7.

This question would seem on the first glance to mean: is there an Anglo-Welsh nation which has its own literature in its own language? It is unlikely that anyone would answer that question with a "Yes," except possibly some native of South Pembrokeshire.¹⁰³

And so it goes on. Lewis' arguments have been frequently rehearsed since, and will not be quoted at length here, but at the heart of the paper were the notions that an

... extension of English has everywhere accompanied the decay of that [Welsh, rural] culture, the loss of social traditions and of social unity and the debasement of spiritual values.

... I conclude then that there is not a separate literature that is Anglo-Welsh, and that it is improbable that there ever can be . . .

The growth of the Anglo-Welsh writing in recent years is the inevitable reflection of the undirected drifting of Welsh national life.¹⁰⁴

In treating the concept of an Anglo-Welsh literature in the manner of the Anglo-Irish literature, Lewis refused to acknowledge that the idiom of Anglo-Welsh writers could be derived from anything other than 'the virtues of English poets and letters', whereas 'it was the main intention of the Anglo-Irish literary movement to write for Ireland.' There is little relief here for any Welsh writer in English. Lewis' presumption is that only an originally or currently rural, non-conformist, Welsh-speaking community and its writers could represent or be represented as Wales. For the millions of native-born Welshwomen and men who, as a more or less direct result of the *Education Act* of 1870¹⁰⁵ were

¹⁰³ Lewis, Saunders, 1939, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, Saunders, 1939, p. 13-14.

¹⁰⁵ The *Act*, in its main articles ruled that all children in Wales must be educated solely in English till they were thirteen – way beyond the age that most working-class Welsh children (there were few others) had left school.

brought up (and bullied into submission by devices such as the Welsh Knot),¹⁰⁶ to speak and read only English, this is hard indeed.

As we have seen, Gwyn Jones' book brought some measure of reassurance to 'Anglo-Welsh' writers, and set the path for a more reasoned debate about what was, and what could be Welsh writing in English. But, even today the tensions between the Welsh language community and Welsh writers in English can erupt, even when commentators are not trying to be inflammatory. For Bobbi Jones, writing in *Planet* in 1980, it seemed entirely in order to describe – in an otherwise relatively constructive essay, the 'predicament' of Anglo-Welsh writing as

A perversion of normality, it is a grunt, or a cry, or an odour rising from a cultural wound of a special kind.¹⁰⁷

And the wound opens both ways. For, just as there have been fierce critics of 'Anglo-Welsh' writing, so we must remember that had it not been for the work of writers and patriots like Lewis or more recently, Jones (with scores in between), there may not now be a Welsh language in any viable sense. In the nineteen fifties, around the same time that Gwyn Thomas was celebrating *The First Forty Years*, journalist – and Welshman, James Morris could write in the following terms:

There is a substantial slice of Wales notably in the industrial regions of the south, where Welshism is scarcely predominant. Generations of English influence and immigration have tempered the peculiarities of

¹⁰⁶ Children heard speaking Welsh in school would be forced to wear a heavy board or sign tied around their neck signifying their wrongdoing. It was the job of any child thus identified to catch another child in the same crime, whence they could pass on the board. Whoever wore the board at the end of the school day was beaten in front of the class.

¹⁰⁷ Jones, J. R., 'Need the Language Divide Us?', *Planet* 16, (49/50), January 1980, p. 25, quoted in Hooker, Jeremy, 2001, p. 11.

those parts. Welsh is hardly spoken. Welsh nationalism is distinctly suspect, the mumbo-jumbo of the eisteddfodau and the bardic lays is comic rather than inspirational...¹⁰⁸

And, the cultural and political divide between the industrial south, largely socialist, (and naturally looking for economic solutions to their intense poverty during the twentieth century that would come from the Labour Party), and the rural west and mid-Wales communities (who looked to nationalist solutions for their cultural and social relief) is marked, and has provided two streams of political activity and party allegiance in Wales for close on 80 years.

As Edwards and Williams note, in discussing what they call 'the two sides of red-dragon politics', between the 'red flag' of the industrial heartlands of south Wales, and the growing success during the decade or so after the Second World War of the nationalists in rural and Welsh-speaking constituencies:

In the cauldron of post-war south Wales Labour politics, it was sometimes difficult to avoid the tendency of equating the Welsh language with nationalist political affiliations and sympathies.¹⁰⁹

A telling example is given also concerning the once secretary of State for Wales, later Speaker of the Commons, George Thomas (who was also a Labour MP for Cardiff east, an anti-devolutionist, and a Welshman). Thomas believed that the proponents of devolution were the Welsh 'first-cousins' of nationalists:

They were more sympathetic naturally because they worshipped in Welsh, they talked in Welsh, they sang in Welsh, their life was Welsh, but that wasn't so true down here in the south,, except in a part of Pembrokeshire and of course the Llanelli area and Swansea, but in the Glamorgan valleys and the western valleys of Monmouthshire, they [the Labour supporters] were very largely Anglicised, and the first language

¹⁰⁸ Morris, J., in 'Welshness in Wales', *Wales* 32 (September 1958), 13-23, p.13.

¹⁰⁹ Edwards, A. & Williams, M. E., 2012, p 72.

was English. A language can be a great divider, and it can cause difficulties, you only have to look at the Balkans to see that¹¹⁰

Even the great Aneurin Bevan ran into the red dragon/red flag and language conflict, when he spoke on the opening (Gymanfa Ganu) day of the 1958 Ebbw Vale National Eisteddfod. He said to the crowd:

You will find the true qualities of the Welsh people here, in Monmouthshire, even though you may not always hear their sentiments expressed in the language of heaven.

And, referring to the rest of the Eisteddfod, to be conducted strictly in Welsh as tradition demands, he said that the following day, he would be present, but 'rendered inarticulate'.¹¹¹

In the literary world, following on from Gwyn Thomas' establishment of a canon, albeit young, there came a gradual acceptance of the existence of a body of work loosely described by the title 'Anglo-Welsh'. Until Glyn Jones' *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, a detailed study of a wide range of writers was lacking. Jones concentrates rather more on poets than writers of prose, and includes amongst his studies writers Caradoc Evans, and he gives some thought to what constitutes a Welsh writer in English.

For one thing, who are the Anglo-Welsh? I defined them first simply as Welshmen who write in English. Later, I qualified this... to those Welshmen who write in English about Wales. . .¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Bangor University Archives, Bangor Cymru 2000 Collection, interview with Lord Tonnybandy (George Thomas), 17 August 1995. Reproduced in

¹¹¹ Williams, Daniel G., 2010, p. 16.

¹¹² Jones, Glyn, 1968, p. 39.

And, broadly, though others (Stephen Knight, Alyce von Rothkirch, Roland Mathias) have tried to make the definition more precise, it remains settled on the broad definition of Welsh matter written in English. Of the scale and breadth of Welsh writing in English, there have naturally been enlargements to the period as the decades have rolled by – to the point where Stephen Knight can title his 2004 study *A Hundred Years of Fiction: Writing Wales in English*.¹¹³ A very small number of academics and critics – most notable amongst whom is Raymond Garlick, have sought to enlarge the canon by taking its origins further back, way beyond Evans, into the fifteenth century. Despite the careful textual readings, Garlick struggles to persuade that Hywel Swrdwal's *Hymn to The Virgin* (c. 1470)¹¹⁴ really represents the start of an unbroken line of Welsh writing in English reaching through to the present, and few critics – or writers – have followed his lead.

Much of the most vibrant debate now circles hotly about the stylistic, and more interestingly of late, the theoretical interstices. Harri Webb, with usual grouchy good sense has attacked the problem of definition and moral approach for Welsh writers in English. He identifies an attitude of mind as a key characteristic of decent (and the decency and honesty is certainly important for Webb) Welsh writing in English, rather than Jones' matter-of-Wales approach:

... between the 'Anglo' and the 'Welsh' falls the hyphen. It is a tightrope for the agile clowning of Gwyn Thomas, a delicate bi-cultural balancing act for Glyn Jones, a narrow and lofty pulpit for R. S. Thomas.
 . . . the hyphen represents a synthesis, however uneasy or disputed,. For Anglo-Welsh writing does not spring from a mature tradition: its boundaries are in doubt, its standards in chaos, many of its

¹¹³ Knight, Stephen, 2004.

¹¹⁴ Garlick, Raymond, 1970, pp. 8-12.

claims bogus. Yet it has its own validity because it represents a genuine attitude to life and to writing.¹¹⁵

Also, in the same letter to Meic Stephens, Webb anticipates the central concerns of David T. Lloyd's *Writing on the Edge: Interviews with Writers and Editors of Wales*, by a commendable thirty-two years. Webb (and later, Lloyd) is concerned by the issue of publication for Welsh writers in English:

The biggest source of artistic corruption lies in the availability of a mass-market with an insatiable appetite for the quaint and the grotesque. The writer who succumbs at this point will find he is turning out caricatures, becoming reliant on farce. There is also the temptation to write for one of the several minority audiences that abound in English-language publishing. Hardly any of the first generation of Anglo-Welsh writers escaped this fate...¹¹⁶

In Lloyd's book, most of the editors he interviews touch on the writer's conundrum: publish in England and be lost to Wales, or publish in Wales and reach a very small readership. For poets, this is not such an issue, for as Yr Academi Gymreig - The Welsh Academy's own literature says:

Conventional wisdom says that short fiction will sell so long as you get a novel out first and that poetry never does. Not in sufficient quantity anyway.¹¹⁷

So, poets will not sell wherever they publish, short story writers need a novel first, and anyone who publishes honourably in Wales will be restricted to a limited market. Tony Curtis, when asked by David T Lloyd about Welsh Arts

¹¹⁵ Harri Webb, in a letter to Meic Stephens, 1965: collected in Webb, Harri, (Stephens, M., Ed.) 1998, p. 89.

¹¹⁶ Webb, Harri, (Stephens, M., Ed.) 1998, pp. 89-90.

¹¹⁷ Yr Academi Gymreig - The Welsh Academy: website information:

<http://www.literaturewales.org/information-and-advice/i/124037/> Retrieved 16/7/2012.

council funding and sustenance identifies a secondary problem for small-scale, publicly funded arts, that of quality and critical breadth:

The poetry is relatively easily funded. What we lack is a critical context of any sophistication. One of the problems with the magazines is the blandness of the reviews, and the fact that Welsh people review their own stuff. ... Has anyone ever told you what the distribution is for these three magazines [*Planet*, *Poetry Wales*, and *The New Welsh Review*]. . .

If every school and library had a copy you would triple sales immediately. That's what we need to do – not give people bloody bursaries for writing poems.... Why are we having conferences about defining and re-defining Wales? What we've got to do is actually get the work out . . . we end up lecturing about each other, and writing reviews of each other's books. What is going on?¹¹⁸

One of Wales' greatest prose writers, Emyr Humphries faced the dilemma of publishing location, and settled for the honourable, loyally nationalist route. After his first novel, *A Toy Epic* (1958), was published in England and won the Hawthornden Prize, Humphries returned to Wales and has published ever since through Welsh publishers. This means he is almost entirely unknown to a whole generation of readers both in and outside Wales. As M Wynn Thomas describes, Humphries' recognition is pitiful:

While the large body of work that he has produced over the past fifty years, including some twenty works of fiction, has secured his reputation as the greatest novelist of twentieth-century Wales, he has been steadily overlooked by English critics. In other words, he has himself fallen victim to a kind of cultural repression.¹¹⁹

Thomas picks up the same argument later, when providing a foreword to the Library of Wales (Parthian) re-publication of Humphries' works. This time, Thomas homes in on the newest area of criticism now emerging particularly

¹¹⁸ Lloyd, David T., 1997, pp. 161-162.

¹¹⁹ M. Wynn Thomas, Foreword to Humphries, Emyr, 2006, p xii.

from CREW¹²⁰, with the lead taken by Kirsti Bohata. The application of post-colonial theory to Welsh writing in English yields some sharp new perspectives. Thomas finds, for example in Humphries both the political and cultural stance of postcolonial fiction, but also the linguistic traits of postcolonial writing centred around what Kirsti Bohata calls 'choosing a language' and 'code-switching'¹²¹:

Given Emyr Humphries' early tutelage under Saunders Lewis, and his resultant sensitivity to the colonial aspects of the Welsh condition, *A Man's Estate* may also be reasonably regarded as broadly anticipating the Welsh 'postcolonial' fiction Humphries went on to write. It was an early product of his identification (implicit in his turning of his back on the metropolis) with a Welsh nation acquiring a consciousness in English, during a decade of rapid decolonisation, of its long cultural and political subordination by England.¹²²

The idiom of the novel likewise refuses to compromise with any respected English discourse of its day. *A Man's Estate* respects the rural religious society with which it is dealing sufficiently to judge it by its own best light, and not by those of any supposedly more advanced cultural centre.¹²³

The prose fiction of Welsh writing in English has received little attention to date for its experimental tendencies – and here a significant feature of 'Ugly Lovely' emerges. Little has been written about Welsh writing in English and modernism. Christopher Wigginton published *Modernism from the Margins* in 2007, but his interest was solely focused on poetry – and then only on MacNeice and Dylan Thomas. (It is worth referring here to some of Harri Webb's comments later in the same letter to Meic Stephens quoted above. Webb worries that of the early

¹²⁰ Centre for Research into the English Literature and Language of Wales.

¹²¹ Bohata, Kirsti, 2004, pp. 113- 128.

¹²² M. Wynn Thomas, 'A Huge Assembling of Unease: Readings in *A Man's Estate*', in Gramich, Katie (Ed.), 2010, p. 202.

¹²³ M. Wynn Thomas, 'A Huge Assembling of Unease: Readings in *A Man's Estate*', in Gramich, Katie (Ed.), 2010, p.203.

generations of writers, and poets in particular 'seem to have strayed into a faded limbo of Thirties modishness.')

¹²⁴

Moving usefully away from the previously tight focus on thirties modernist poetry has been Laura Wainwright, in an as yet unpublished PhD thesis for Cardiff University. Wainwright argues that because Welsh writing in English was

...flourishing for the most part, after the high Modernist period, between 1930 and 1949; and tending to be concerned with rural and industrial locations and milieus in a way that contravenes the popular conception of Modernism as an 'art of the cities', Anglophone Welsh writing has, to use [Raymond] Williams' terms, "been counted out of development" – "stuck in the post-", and on the periphery.¹²⁵

Wainwright's thesis usefully queries expectations of modernism and modernist scripts, locating these into a localised or regionally specific articulation of modernism, which Dolye and Winkiel propose as 'geo-modernisms'.¹²⁶

Additionally in her exploration of the work of Gwyn Thomas and Glyn Jones, Wainwright's approaches to a Welsh modernism have some success. Wainwright is, for example able to identify many of the features of linguistic experimentation common to both these key Welsh writers in English. Particularly, in her discussion of Thomas and Jones's refusals to adopt the codes of English grammar; Wainwright shares an area of interest with Bohata,

¹²⁴ Webb, Harri, (Stephens, M., Ed.) 1998, p 90.

¹²⁵ Wainwright, Laura, 2010, p.7.

¹²⁶ Doyle L., & Winkiel, L (Eds.), 2005, pp. 1-14.

who has similarly identified the code-switching referred to above for her theorising around post-colonialism. Wainwright's conclusion then, opens a space for 'continued study of Welsh Modernism alongside other international modernisms... both canonical and non-canonical,' which Bohata's work begins to address, but only in the context of colonialism and its application to Wales and Welsh writing in English.

The extent to which 'Ugly Lovely' is shaped by the concerns of the writers of Welsh literature in English is clear in its treatment of place, its focus on a particular set of economic forces acting in a particular direction in a given moment and setting, and in its concern with some stylistic and structural techniques of writers about modernity. The short-story sequence and the story in general have roots that stretch back to Gilgamesh, through renaissance texts, into the modernist period, and forwards to the gritty tales of Wales' newer writers like Niall Griffiths. But, exactly what the ingredient is that makes for a text in English to be able to register its Welshness remains problematic. It can involve linguistic play, code-switching and grammar bending, it can be simply a matter of setting, and it can be a matter of a 'bi-cultural balancing act' and an attitude of mind. Mostly though, it just lives in the day to day receptiveness of writers to the moments that exist, the people who move, around them. Again, Harri Webb can deliver us out of difficulty with common sense, and in a way that identifies Donno precisely:

What is Welsh about an Anglo-Welsh writer is obviously not the language in which he writes. It is not even any special use of that language apart from a few colloquialisms carried over from the Welsh language...

He is what writers in Welsh have always been, from the warrior-poet who went to Catraeth twelve-hundred years ago to the milkman and minister who collect their book-tokens for winning at the National Eisteddfod. He is no different from his neighbours except for the trade he plies. He is only marginally more articulate than the people who sit next to him in the bar or bus.¹²⁷

The city of Swansea (and to a lesser extent, its people, *en masse*) functions very much as a character in 'Ugly Lovely', slowly filling out as the driver journeys around. Swansea is not simply the place where Donno works and lives, it plays a strong part in shaping him, in defining his Welshness and in feeding his sense of dislocation.

Blanche Gelfant makes the same broad point, but with specific reference to city novels of the modern period:

As a shaping experience upon the modern ... literary mind, the city has made its impression not only as a physical place but more important as a characteristic and unique way of life.

This... is realised within the novel as the city becomes a key actor in a human drama. It participates in the action as a *physical place*, which makes a distinctive impression upon the mind and senses; as an *atmosphere*, which affects the emotions; and as a total *way of life* – a set of values and manners and a frame of mind – which molds character and destiny.¹²⁸

A smallish south Wales city, with a central community dating back several hundred years, Swansea is at the time of 'Ugly Lovely', re-made, its town centre stripped out and replaced by modern development. In another sense, Swansea has been re-made, transfigured, drawn to face the modern in a process not entirely constructive and certainly not organic. Once a major international port

¹²⁷ Webb, Harri, (Stephens, M., Ed.) 1998, pp. 90-91.

¹²⁸ Gelfant, Blanche H., 1970, pp. 3-4.

serving the Welsh mines and home to the largest concentration of copper smelters in the world, the Swansea of the story sequence now relies not on mass-employment from long-secure heavy industries, but on what appear to Don to be a succession of small and short-lived businesses run from enterprise units on industrial estates. In his journeys, Don registers bitter disappointment that the city centre has too many bars that were once banks, too many ineffective one-way systems, a coach station that smells of piss. When Don was small, the city was the shopping hub for numerous close knit suburbs, had streets full of independent shops and a handful of grand, family-run, department stores. The centre also, importantly, had a life and sizeable community of its own; based around terraces of small houses, street corner pubs and schools.

Draining the energy and life of the centre in Don's mind now are too many out-of-town shopping centres, too many brown-brick link houses, too much street crime and too many bored teenagers. It is many places in Britain, but in its loss of the heavy industrial network that linked iron and steel works with pits and port, it speaks in particular of the nature of Welsh industrial and social decline. With a large and busy port and a hinterland of industrial activity fed by rail, Swansea looked both outwards to the sea, and upwards, into the valleys of Wales – into 'Welsh Wales', as Don has it. The place lacks certainty, is overshadowed by its past, and unable to define its place in the future. The narrator's family also has many of the city's decadent features, falling quietly

but surely from economic grace and losing social purpose – though Compsons¹²⁹ they are not.

Swansea is disappointing to Don for another reason: because it runs – in his mind, a second to Cardiff. In 'Waiting', his attitude to his home city is clearly established when he says that:

. . . there's no capital grandeur, no red tarmac around the central hall like in Cardiff, not even a decent castle ruin to speak of, and, now, no bloody industry either. No, Swansea's just a little bit too far down the road from the bridge and Cardiff. It's an hour on from Cardiff down roads that seem as if they're running out of puff the further they get from the rest of the world - which means London and Cardiff.¹³⁰

But Don, like many in Swansea (and Cardiff), overlooks what was a very significant past for the city. The *Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales* goes some way to giving a more realistic picture of Swansea's history and contribution to the national economy:

From the late 17th century to 1801, Swansea's population grew by 500% - the first official census (in 1841) indicated that, with 6,099 inhabitants, Swansea had become significantly larger than Glamorgan's county town, Cardiff, and was the second most populous town in Wales behind Merthyr Tydfil (which had a population of 7,705).

However, the census understated Swansea's true size, as much of the built-up area lay outside the contemporary boundaries of the borough; so the total population was actually 10,117. Swansea's population was later overtaken by Merthyr in 1821 and by Cardiff in 1881, although in the latter year Swansea once again surpassed Merthyr.¹³¹

The contradictions of Swansea's outlook and self-perception are highlighted in the text. On the one hand, the city's people (as voiced by Don) feel second to

¹²⁹ The decline of the Compsons is played out in the broken narratives of Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. Faulkner's influence is discussed above.

¹³⁰ 'Waiting', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

¹³¹ Davies, John *et al*, (Eds.), 2008, p. 171.

Cardiff, outside of the mainstream forces of Welsh life; in reality, they command as much force in shaping the nation as the larger capital. John Davies points out that had the 1997 Devolution vote been left to the wishes of Cardiff residents the already thin margin of some 6,000 votes in favour would have been much reduced:

...the County of Cardiff's Yes vote was not sufficient for the capital to deliver an affirmative return. In the County of Swansea, the assembly was supported by 52% of those who voted; the percentage in Cardiff was 48%...¹³²

Likewise, on the bidding between Welsh cities to house the new National Assembly, following the eventual; affirmative vote, Davies shows just how close the competition was between the two large cities:

Several applications were received – from Swansea, Aberystwyth, Caernarfon, Wrexham, Newtown, Machynlleth, as well as from Cardiff. Swansea's application was 'particularly imaginative and practical', but in the spring of 1998 it was announced that the application of the capital was 'too persuasive to be withstood.'¹³³

Don's tendency to skim the surface of his city's history and find the romantic view is clear in his references to the life of Mumbles' fishermen:

A lot of tourists moan that there aren't any pubs right on the sea wall, looking out over the bay. But, when they were all built, back in the days of the oyster fleets, when fishing was the mainstay for the place, the last thing blokes wanted in a pub was to look at the sea after they'd just spent ten or twelve hours in an open boat struggling with the bastard.¹³⁴

The rugged mythologizing suits Don better than hard historical realities. He overlooks the economics of the industry and its contribution to the nation's

¹³² Davies, John, 2007, p. 674.

¹³³ Davies, John, 2007, p. 675.

¹³⁴ 'Into the Light', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

earlier prosperity. Partly, this is a feature of character- Don is developed in 'Ugly Lovely' as a mythologiser, a romantic who picks carefully the grounds on which he wishes to peg his historical awareness. He is developed as character who skirts around awkward truths and often seeks a neat summary in place of realities. His romantic summation of an industry serves also to demonstrate the ways that 'Ugly Lovely' explores the ways that many Welsh people, because of education and upbringing are ignorant of their own history and culture. Don does not know that Mumbles was the largest exporter of oysters in the world for a large part of the nineteenth century.

... the hey-day of the industry was from 1850 until 1873. . .
20,000 oysters was not an uncommon catch for a single boat and each boat could make two journeys a day. At its height, around 560 men were employed in 188 skiffs¹³⁵

Like many of the passengers that he criticises for their negative views and lack of awareness, Don too has only a superficial knowledge of Welsh economic history – and because the history is unknown, the perception of the present too is flawed. Tony Conran makes a similar point with reference to awareness of Welsh literary history:

... it seems a shame that intelligent Welshmen should get degrees in the humanities without even knowing what a gododdin was¹³⁶

Don experiences the benefits of both the new small-scale economic energy in Swansea's light, secondary industries, and the withering dockland trade in different ways; he needs the one, and appreciates, in an emotional, visceral

¹³⁵ Information from the Oystermouth Historical Society:
<https://sites.google.com/site/ahistoryofmumbles/home> retrieved 20/8/2012. See also:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/4287443.stm accessed 20/12/2011.

¹³⁶ Conran, Tony, 1986, p. 13.

way, the other. He moves between both of these, recognising the necessities of the present, but unable to dispense with the comfort derived from the past, however mythologised it has become.

In 'Over the Water', Don remembers the nights when the blast furnace was tapped at the great steel plant at Port Talbot where his father worked. Originating across Swansea Bay from his Mumbles home, the glow from the plant

. . . came up from the ground and slowly mounted the clouds across the bay. The clouds went dark red first, then the fire would seem to surge and grip the sky, and light the bay red and orange. Even now it's a hell of a sight. The colour used to terrify me back then and make me proud of the old man at the same time. I knew Dad was in there somewhere, and I used to have a vague idea that he was there in his white plastic hard-hat that he always had on the back seat of the car, turning a great big wheel to make the bubbling cauldron of iron point at the sky. It was like his way of waving goodnight to me and Mam.¹³⁷

The memory is a comforting one, especially because, as we learn in 'Over the Water', Don's father died when Don was 'just short of ten'. But, this moment is similar to Don's treatment of the oyster fishermen - it is an image borne of romance, transfiguring the tough daily – and nightly, graft of the steelworkers into a mythologised epic, casting a comforting glow over the Bay, lighting the clouds and warming the heart.

Don is susceptible to such moments of romanticisation, and has a soft spot for the legends that he feels around him in the present. In 'Fallen' he tells us a story about an episode in the bombing of Swansea during World War Two. We learn that Don's favourite café:

¹³⁷ 'Over the Water', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

the Terminus was the only thing left standing when a half-ton bomb hit the block in '41.

The story goes that the place was full of fire crews who'd taken to sleeping on benches and the floor of the place after the main fire station was flattened during the first night of bombing. Two dozen dusty, smoke-reeking blokes, flat out after twenty-four hours on shouts in the centre were thrown awake when the sky cracked and the Terminus lurched and heaved.

The windows came in and the doors left their hinges, but when the dust settled there was no other damage; even the urn still worked. As the crews grabbed their helmets and stumbled outside, the street on either side was no more than two long piles of smoking bricks five or six feet high but, between them, coated in dust though otherwise untouched, was the Terminus and the fire engines parked outside.¹³⁸

In the language Don uses to describe the event, we can see a movement towards myth-making. Gone is the relatively hard-nosed take on Swansea life and goings-on. In place is an elevated and somewhat poetic expression of events. Phrases like 'thrown awake', 'the sky cracked', 'the Terminus lurched and heaved' have no place in Don's day-to-day descriptions of his city. But here, they register a past with which he feels comfortable, a past largely poetical and fictional.

Don's longing for the world he knows never quite was provides a consideration of the concept *hiraeth*, much featured in Welsh poetic works. The word has no direct English equivalent, but translates to an invocation of longing, nostalgia, wistfulness, and a mournful yearning for the Wales of the past. (Portuguese and Galician have words which match almost directly in meaning and traditional usage.)

¹³⁸ 'Fallen', in 'Ugly Lovely'.

In 'Into the Light', we hear of the old Swansea so revered by Don, transformed into a bleak, soulless run of bars that help the locals wash their disappointments down:

Wind Street is one of those places that makes anyone over forty shudder and write to the local paper. It used to be the banking street of the city, all posh granite fronted buildings, wide pavements and big porticoes with double oak doors. When I was a boy, in the daytimes it was awash with dark-suited blokes with grey hair and serious looking secretaries. Then the banks decided that no-one needed bank branches anymore, so a lot of the buildings were boarded. Nowadays it's side to side bars. Big Aussie style beer holes; swish post-modern bars with really uncomfortable aluminium stools and blocks of tellies hanging from the ceiling and slabs of slate to piss on in the bogs; themed Mexican bars where all the staff wear stupid sombreros and they have a special machine that can fill a tray of twenty tequila slammers at the same time...¹³⁹

The 'culture' here is nothing but a slurry of mixed post-modern tags dedicated to sales and consumption, to alcoholic forgetfulness and momentary enjoyment.

Donno's uncertain and increasingly cynical experience of *hiraeth*, however, is one where historical reality and myth comfortably conflate, the myth often swamping the history. He is aware of this in both the family stories he has been surrounded by, and in taxi tales. He refers frequently and knowingly to the many things that never quite were. In this respect the work explores one of the tensions of Welsh writing in English. During periods of the twentieth century, numerous writers, critics and publishers have pandered to a market for what Raymond Williams calls:

...the accommodation, in its different forms. There is the costume past, as a tourist attraction: things never distinctly Welsh, the tall hats and the dressers, presented as local pieties, things invented in the bad

¹³⁹ 'Into the Light' in 'Ugly Lovely'.

scholarship or the romantic fancies of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – versions of bardism and druidism.¹⁴⁰

This overblown sense of *hiraeth* for a world, a people, a society that never really was does not always sit well with Donno, despite his own romanticisation of aspects of his culture.

Most of what is learned about the driver's life is partially modified by the narratives and actions of others, some in an immediate way in his car, others distant in the places he hears about in the tales themselves. Whilst his experiences of place and location, and his first-level responses to events are usually framed by the immediate economic conditions of his working life, his past has left him with a welter of cultural assumptions and learned historical perspectives that seem to offer fewer and fewer useful mechanisms for coping realistically with this daily life.

The city and the driver (and to some lesser extent, his fellow townspeople) are refreshed in the short term by a number of factors, each of which is balanced against the longer-term cultural forces which tend towards entropy and decay. First, the city is refreshed by the sea, that provides a living reminder of the larger commercial, civic and industrial past of the port. In ways that are important to the visual and thematic concerns of the narrative; the sea offers a useful paradox in its changeability and its predictability.

¹⁴⁰ Williams, Raymond, 2003, p. 10.

The city and narrator's grip and control on the present are set against the un-tameability and unpredictability of the sea, yet, everyone in the work, especially the narrator draws refreshment and energy from the visual and atmospheric change brought about twice daily with its tides. As the moving waters physically refresh the shoreline, so the people and city are reassured, and invigorated by the natural movement.

In the work, a strong contrast is drawn between relentless century-long industrial removal, slow, incremental civic decay, and the vibrancy and power, as well as the reliability and regularity, of daily tides and momentary waves. The sea, the beaches and the possibilities of travel still suggested by the dying docks (and their newer, lightweight, marina descendant) also serve as devices in the work to offer a change of scale, and to avoid any over-constrained setting imposed by the closed intimacy of the car in which a large part of the narrative unfolds.

The sea also serves in an immediate way then to bring variety and new, sometimes challenging perspectives, before the driver. In the form of new and different people on the few ships that still call at the docks, the taxi driver is able to move – at least for the duration of a journey – outside his city and its situation. Through these passengers, the driver is able to encounter a range of cultural and ethnic perspectives and attitudes which serve as devices to shift or modify his own cultural awareness and sensitivity.

The city and driver are kept active also by the railway line linking the port to London. In a very direct sense, the economic sustainability of the driver's and city's future rely upon this source of economic energy. The line is

vital to the city, bringing visitors, business and cultural transfusions from London, but the work touches just as much on the ways that such economic energy whilst materially beneficial, increasingly serves to separate the city from its past, and dissolve its long-held sense of identity and cultural pride. It is the link to London that drains the city of talent, and leads to Anglicisation of culture and community, diluting and eroding the Welshness of the region¹⁴¹. For the city and its culture, for Welshness, the influence of the link is presented as gradually erosive.

Running through the narrator's comments is an acceptance that the railway re-focuses the city's gaze, away from the sea, and away from the Valleys' hinterland that were mutually reinforcing sources of economic and cultural sustenance in the days of coal, iron, steel and shipping. The Welsh hills, and the valleys that sit behind are a looming presence throughout the work, offering a physical reminder of the interior, more strongly Welsh nation that sits above and behind the coastal plain across which railway and motorway now run.

The driver/narrator calls up, and dismisses, the various family memories, just as the cab characters call him up and move on. He had a decent school education –and as in most Welsh families, this was seen as an important asset. Beyond school, and as his country moved further into its slow post-war economic decline, Donno is losing certainty, losing clarity about his role and purpose. He went to university, but left after a year, disillusioned. He maintains

¹⁴¹ Seen in 'Ugly Lovely', for example, also in 'Mikey', and in 'One Way'. The direction of these stories echoes Thomas' remark about Swansea as a graveyard of ambition.

a cynicism about the experience, but is full of self-doubt and insecurity. Over years he has become hardened to the indignity of watching his peers arriving back twice or three times a year from their affluent lives in London or elsewhere, to pay a family visit to the old town.

He both hates and loves the city, and is disappointed with himself and it; his former friends have all moved on, appear to have careers and hope, whilst he and what is left of his family have fractured existences without order or direction – and without a reliability which can command respect from Don. He seems to spend all his time looking backwards, drafting grander narratives out of other's experiences. The mirror of his taxi, through which he sees his passengers, and in which he conducts most of his workday conversations provides a useful metaphor for his state of mind and indirect way of approaching the world. He needs to establish some order, some perspective, on his life and family, and establish some emotional distance between himself and them before he can see himself and his future with any clarity.

Research for the story sequence explored the body of work produced by Welsh writers in English, very many of whom deal with the cultural uncertainty they feel about their nation and its literature. Many present an unsentimental vision of dissolving industries and economy, Anglicisation, loss of non-conformist faith. And, in addressing the language question, the difficulties for a Welsh writer in English, 'Ugly Lovely' enters that contested ground of Welsh writing in English, contributing to the ways that successive writers have searched for a particular kind of Welshness but also asserted a new and

ultimately resilient expression of culture and identity through their use of their nation's second language.

To write critically of a work that one has written is a particularly Janus-like activity; on the one hand, one writes and analyses with an eye for an informed critical audience, and under the pressure and in full engagement with the body of critical work one hopes to address and to which one hopes to contribute. Yet, at the same time, one is conscious of and drawn to explore causations and connectivities in the work that sometimes pertain only to the experience involved in the creation of that work.

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