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AR DRAWS Y DŴR—ACROSS THE WATER: TWO SHORT STORIES AND A NOVELLA

Marianne Patricia Ota

A Thesis

in

the Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By MARIANNE PATRICIA OTA

Entitled AR DRAWS Y DWR—ACROSS THE WATER:
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Complies with the regulations of this University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality

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MASTER OF ARTS

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Chairman

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11 October 1978

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ABSTRACT

AR DRAWS Y DWR—ACROSS THE WATER:

TWO SHORT STORIES AND A NOVELLA

Marianne Patricia Ota

The two short stories and novella of which this thesis is comprised are about a girl called Rachel who grows up on a Welsh island. The first story, "The Divil," gives the cultural background: Protestant/Catholic antagonism and the hell-fire religion of the Irish parish priest. The story ends on a light note. The second story, "Early One Summer," deals with the frustration caused by this restrictive background and Rachel's first experience of falling in love. In the novella, Across the Water—which forms the main part of the thesis—Rachel succeeds where she has failed in "Early One Summer." She is able to transcend her narrow background. Literally and psychologically, she leaves the island and "crosses the water."

THE DIVIL

Rachel raced the wind across the field, turned a cart-wheel, and threw herself down in the grass. A black-spotted lady-bird crawled from the earth on to her hand and began to move up her arm. It tickled and she laughed out loud. She watched the clouds riding by and the sunshine breaking through in triumph. Then a shadow crossed her mind: she had left home several minutes ago— if she did not hurry she would be late for the church class. Fro O'Connor would be furious and he was terrible anyway. He dragged her little sister Irene into his big black car one day, drove off to a lonely lane, and kept her captive until she learnt all of the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins. He stopped her mother in the market-place and shouted above the noise of the crowd, "Wicked woman, you have missed Mass!" He rounded up the Catholics every Sunday morning by banging on their front doors and yelling, "Wake up, you Sinners, and get ready for Mass!" She half-ran, half-stumbled, to the rusty gate leading to the lane, gave one last lingering look behind at a cabbage butterfly full of sunshine and freedom flying near the ditch smelling of sweet flowers, and began to race towards the church. How lucky Irene was to be tucked up in bed with a teddy-bear, hot-water bottle, and feverish cold!

As she approached the grey, pebble-dashed building, she began to drag her feet, twist her hands, and kick stones. She reached its badly-fitted wooden door, grated it open and listened to its prolonged screech as she forced it shut with caught breath and burning ears. She straightened the red ribbon in her dark tangled hair and walked shyly into the church.

The air inside choked her. It was heavy with dust and stale incense. She shuddered when she saw again the mouldy patches and dark cracks shivering with water-drops on the walls. As usual, the six bare electric light-bulbs in the ceiling were out to save money, and the only light came from the sunshine trying to struggle through the dirty window near the front. Her eyes searched for colour to cheer her up, but even the pictures of the Stations of the Cross were covered with dust; and dust dimmed the vivid red, gold and blue of the statues of Mary, Joseph, and the Sacred Heart. The only thing she liked about the church was that it used to be a stable—it still had rafters—and was like Bethlehem in the story.

Suffocating, she started to walk down the aisle. Fr. O'Connor was sitting on the dais before the altar, on his throne, a large carved chair with red velvet cushions. He did not return her smile but stared as she hurried to sit among the eleven children in the front two rows of creaking, torn-paint chairs. She tripped over one chair and landed in the next.

"And what manner of behaviour is this, Rachel Jones?" Fr. O'Connor demanded, his frost-blue eyes hardened by anger.

"Yes, father. I mean—sorry, father."

"Aren't you eight years old now, and shouldn't you be setting an example for the little ones?"

Two of the little ones, identical twins with plaits, pink-check ribbons, and squints, turned round and pulled out their identical tongues at her.

"Shame on you now! I suppose 'tis your wicked mother not sending you to church on time."

"No, father. It's my fault."

"Let's just ignore her, children, and go on."

Rachel blistered with dry red anger. She struggled against it. Anger was one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It was a frightening sin to be angry with a priest of God.

"Now, dear children, has thor any of you seen a picture of the Divil?" Fr. O'Connor said, glancing in her direction.

"Please, father, no."

"Never."

"Is that right now? O, 'tis a great shame. 'T would be a great warning for you all now. —The Divil, dear children, is horrible to behold. He's big, with goat's feet, and a scarlet tail. He comes at night—and mark me words now—if any choild, whosoever he be, has been wicked, he carries him off to the flames of

Hell where he'll niver see mother nor father again. O, isn't that a dreadful ting now? A turrible tragedy!"

The twins looked solemn. William Williams whistled through his teeth. Ted Pritchard muttered, "Silly bugger!" And Rachel clutched her throat in horror.

"That's one of the reasons I became a priest, dear children—to escape the Divil. And isn't it a great comfort to know now that if you obey the rules with all your might and main you'll be safe from the flames of Hell? O, 'tis so. 'Tis a wonderful comfort to me. What does it matter now if there's struggling and hardship in this short life in the vale of tears when the alternative is an eternity—an eternity, dear children—of suffering in the flames of Hell where thor shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth?"

"Please, father," said Willie Williams, "my aunty hasn't got any to gnash with."

"Teeth will be provided," sniggered Ted Pritchard.

"Let us pray!" Fr. O'Connor said. He knelt on the altar steps, and fervently intoned the 'Hail Mary.' The fading sunlight fell on his greying hair.

* * * * *

She lay in bed with her eyes open. The lights were out. The house was still. Her parents had fallen asleep after a long quarrel. If she could only stay awake all night, she would be able to call out before the Divil pounced. Even if he hid behind the wardrobe,

she might hear him breathe and call for help in time. She did not want to be taken away from her mother and father. Her nose stung with tears and she scratched it as quietly as possible. The grandfather clock struck two.

She was climbing up the Tower of Babel. 'Pride is a Deadly Sin. A Deadly Sin,' a voice warned, but something drove her higher. Suddenly she fell from the top, and at the bottom, the Divil was waiting, waiting with sneering frost-blue eyes.

"The Divil—the Divil—the Divil!" she screamed. " the Divil!"

"Wake up! Rachel, wake up!" Her mother was sitting on her bed.

"Don't let him take me away from you!" she shouted, clinging to her mother's soft blue nightdress.

Her father came into the room. "What's all this?" he said.

"She's had another bad dream, haven't you, Rachel?"

"Duw,* no need to fuss," her father said. "She's all right—aren't you?"

"Yes," Rachel lied.

* * * * *

She stood against the seasick green of the school corridor and watched the Protestant children file into the Music Room for Assembly. They stared as they passed her and the other Catholic children. She raised her chin like a noble rebel about to be shot,

*Duw = God (dieu). About as strong as 'goodness me.'

and felt alien and sad.

Today, Fr. O'Connor was coming to give them Instruction during the half-hour wait.

A few minutes passed and he came hurrying in, muttering nervously, and tearing off his rain-coat and hat. They went to sit in the cloakroom, surrounded by damp coats, wellingtons, and battered plimsolls. Fr. O'Connor handed each of them a well-worn copy of the pink infant's catechism and whispered instructions to them as if they were part of a new Gunpowder Plot.

"Dear children," he whispered urgently, "remember always that you are soldiers of God. You must be ready to die for your faith. —'Tis so."

For a moment, Rachel's spirit pricked up its ears and began to trot about. "Soldiers of Christ" was inspiring. She looked at Ted Pritchard's shock of red hair, and the heroic scar on his cheek that he got from climbing the forbidden tree in the school-yard and falling. She looked at Irene's blue plastic slide, at Maureen's bitten fingernails, at the large vacant face of Willie Williams, at the twins' squints, at Bridget's dirty handkerchief tied to her skirt-strap telling the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Soldiers of Christ!

"Take that smile off your face, you foolish girl!" Fr. O'Connor bellowed. "How deceiving and sinful are the sweet things of this earth!" He plunged into a passionate whispering about the

horrors of temptation. Rachel's spirit broke its leg and limped back into its stable.

"Remember, dear children," Fr. O'Connor whispered on, "that you are the salt of the earth amidst the Protestant pagans. 'Tis so. Never play with a Protestant, however tempted you may be. Children like that go to the Divil. Pray for their conversion—especially the poor children—for they are like sheep lost in the snow."

Willie Williams gorped. Ted Pritchard blushed. Rachel shivered. The others looked small and cold.

"I know 'tis a hard loife, a hard loife for you surrounded by so many pagans, but tink—tink, dear children, of the Holy Martyrs, and remember the hymn!" He started to sing,

"Faith of my Fathers,
. . . . . .
I will be true to you 'til death!"

Rachel shuffled in her chair which seemed to be full of bumps and splinters. What if the whole school heard? She noticed the others fidget too. Finally the loud crooning stopped and Fr. O'Connor said, "Ah! 'tis not so hard as it used to be. When I was sent across the water to this Welsh island from Ireland many years ago, there were but four or five Catholics. We had no church. We used to steal up a rickety ladder into a rented hay-loft for Holy Mass. O, yes! And any time they saw us, the townspeople looked murder and even threw stones. Now isn't that a sin? O,

'tis.—The Church, dear children, is an anchor—an anchor of God in a frightening world. No-one must be allowed to shake it! We must hold fast!"

After this sudden outburst, he mopped the sweat off his trembling face, and said,

"Isn't that so now?"

"Father," Ted Pritchard said suddenly, his face still red.

"Ah. What is it now?"

"The Protestants are not pagans."

There was a frightened silence.

"How dare you question the teachings of Holy Mother the Church?" thundered Fr. O'Connor. "'Tis a frightening sin! And you, the oldest, should be setting these children here an example. Look at you with your rough ways and your ragged clothes! Now isn't that a shame? 'Tis indeed. Ah, I suppose 'tis your father you'll be tinking of who's still a Protestant!"

"Father!—"

"Listen to me!" stormed Fr. O'Connor. "Pray for his conversion while he's still aloive, for after 'twill be too late."

Rachel felt as if someone had poured scalding water on her brain.

"My father too," she whispered to Ted, as she wiped her sweaty hands on her skirt. Ted's eyes were bright with hatred, but he smiled at her rebelliously.

Another hymn rose in the Music Room. Even Fr. O'Connor was stunned into silence for a second. "If they sing like the angels themselves," he muttered, "they are still deceiving pagans." He collected the pink infants' catechisms together and snapped a thin elastic band around them. Rachel no longer heard him. She was listening to the rising hymn. Her spirit flew higher and higher like a kite in a high wind, drunk with the Welsh words and the harmonies.

Fr. O'Connor disappeared in his hat and rain-coat a few moments before the pagans came rushing out of Assembly. Teachers clucked in pursuit like frustrated hens trying to peck order into things. The Protestants ignored the Catholics. Non came out of Assembly and walked past without looking. Ann Griffith came out and marched off stiffly, surrounded by a group of admiring girls. Rachel's cheeks burnt; she felt as if she was trying to hide a dark and shameful secret. Her throat tightened with tears. Then she caught sight of Barbara-Ann, and her feelings changed to fear. Barbara-Ann was taller than she, and broad with it. Rachel hoped that she and her buck-toothed nose-picking friend would not drag her behind the coal-shed and mug her again for home-made treacle-toffee on the pretext that anything that moved and was Catholic was fair game.

"Hey, Rachel!" Ted Pritchard whispered. He slipped her his apple and walked off towards his class.

Rachel entered her wood- and glass-partitioned classroom, with its jam-pots full of tadpoles and withered flowers, alphabet round the walls, open coal fire, and high narrow windows, and felt cheered by the apple in her pocket.

* * * * *

After school they had to go to confession. Rachel kept a crumpled list of her sins in a copy of Alice in Wonderland in case she forgot anything. But however much she tried, she could not stop sinning—so how could she avoid Hell? Was Fr. O'Connor safe because he was a priest? When she grew up she would have to become a nun. But that was a long time away and the Divil might get her first.

She looked at her Sins again: "25 times angry, 10 times proud, 5 lies, plus 31 acts of disobediency": an average fortnight. But there was something worse this time, something new and unwriteable. She dragged down to the church. The sky was grey and seemed to darken.

By the time she arrived, most of the children were already shuffling about on the kneelers, mumbling penances and beating their breasts. Rosary beads clicked busily like knitting needles. Some of the older girls were there. As Rachel walked in, Gloria, a seventeen-year old with long red hair, came drifting out in a black mantilla, a silver crucifix about her throat, large black rosary beads over her arm, and a strange suffering look in her

eyes. Rachel went up to the confession box near the entrance. No sound came from within.

"Psht, Rachel!"

She turned round. It was her sister sitting in the back row with a green scarf looped round her neck, and laughing blue eyes. "Where've you been? Is it O. K. if I go home before you? Me and Maureen want to play marbles," she said.

"Oh. O. K."

"The box is empty—Go in! Hey! I'll scrape this chair against the floor for a few minutes if you like, so that no-one can hear the awful things you've done!"

"Thanks!"

Rachel unjammed the stiff wooden door and collapsed on her knees inside. Irene began to make her chair screech against the stone floor. Rachel almost giggled but remembered the holiness of the box.

"Bless me father for I have sinned, it is two weeks since my last confession and I—I—this time I have done something terrible," she mumbled.

"Yes?" said Fr. O'Connor.

"Father, I—I have stolen a marble from Barbara-Ann."

Ominously, the screeching sound of the chair stopped. Huddled near the floor, she awaited her doom.

"It wasn't a clay one. It was a real bull's eye," she admitted.

A choking sound arose from the other side of the box. "A real bull's eye?" Fr. O'Connor spluttered.

Rachel peered through the dark grille to see if he was all right. "D'you need some water, father?" she asked.

There was a silence followed by more choking and spluttering.

"The doctor told us in first-aid class that you can die if you choke. What should I do?" she said.

The box began to shake as Fr. O'Connor burst into laughter.

"Give—the marble back," he gasped, "and say a 'Hail Mary' for me." He made a shaky Sign of the Cross over her.

Rachel came out of confession in such amazement that she collapsed into the nearest chair and sat there blankly for several minutes. Fr. O'Connor came out of the box, and came over to her.

"You're looking very thoughtful, to be sure," he said.

"Yes, father."

"Your good lady mother was telling me something about bad dreams," he said.

Rachel stared at him and clutched her copy of Alice in Wonderland.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sure you've never seen the statues in here up close, have you now?" he asked. "Would you like to take a look?"

"Yes!" she said.

He lifted her onto his shoulder and carried her to the statue of Mary at the front of the church. Under Mary's white foot was a snake.

"Look!" she said, shrinking away.

"Haven't you seen that before?" Fr. O'Connor asked. "Well, now! I'll tell you about that. That's the Divil in disguise—and as you can see, his head's been crushed by Mary and he's done for."

"Done for?" She looked down into his shy, blue eyes.

"Our Lady has more power. Pray to her!" Fr. O'Connor said.

"Done for?" Rachel repeated.

Light struggled through the grimy window. Fr. O'Connor carried her into the Spring sunshine and put her down on the church path.

"Now you take care on your way home," he said, as he opened the gate to let her go.

Rachel walked home with tears in her eyes—past Non's house, past the chapel on the corner. She caught sight of a robin perched on a telegraph pole, singing. She laughed, started to run through the breeze towards home and was met at the door by Irene, who rattled a bagful of glass marbles.

The bread was thinly sliced and the cakes were on their doilies. The tick of the grandfather clock and the sound of tea being poured into china tea-cups was loud in the silence. Rachel shifted her gaze from the front parlour's grey carpet to a cake-stand holding Victoria sandwich cake,)shortbread and scones. Warily, she looked across at her sister Irene who was inspecting her finger-nails, at her father and uncle Dafydd who stared into the fireplace, and at the mole on aunty Delia's fat and powdered cheek. She envied her youngest sister who was out at Sunday school, and then she recalled the tense atmosphere of the dark, damp church as Fr. O'Connor talked about sin, and changed her mind. It made her angry that Myfanwy was being worried about damnation. No one had any right to upset her sister.

Her mother handed out the tea and the "grown-ups" became animated.

"Rachel's doing well at school," her mother said.

"Yes. Her teachers say she can do anything she likes in the future," her father added, as he heaped some sugar into his tea.

Rachel fidgeted, hating to be on display. She remembered the question Irene had asked that morning as she slammed her hair-brush down on the dressing-table: "So what is there to do around here? Or as Miss Morgan Domestic Science keeps putting it, 'What are you going to do with your lives, anybody, hmm?'"

"Do they really?" her aunt wheezed, inspecting her. "She'll be finishing in a year or two, won't she? Then we shall see!"

Rachel clenched her teaspoon and loathed the hairy mole on her aunt's cheek with her whole being. To escape from the room, she fixed her attention on yesterday. Her gang of seven had jammed themselves into the cinema toilets so they could smoke a cigarette before the Big Feature. Between drags, they discussed Life, but Ann Griffith was more interested in looking at the cracked mirror on the wall and applying smoky-grey eyeshadow; fat Barbara Ann tried to edge her out of the way so she could put on "Passionate Pink" lipstick and Non squeezed out her spots. After a while, Rachel stepped outside into the corridor to get away from elbows and feet, and to sneak a look at the book of poetry she had bought for twopence in a second-hand shop.

"Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white," she read, as a mob of boys came up the stairs. She backed into a corner so they would not see her. And then her heart jumped into her throat as she realized Thomas was among them. And he turned round and noticed her.

He must have thought she was a fool, standing in a dark corner with a poetry book, especially since he was older than she was.

"Girls that age are bloody daft, aren't they?" is what he probably said to his gang. "Especially that one! Duw, it's a wonder

she's got two eyes in the right place!"

They must have howled with laughter.

"Rachel Jones, is it? Duw, the girl's hopeless. Catholic, isn't she?"

More shiggers.

"Duw, you should hear the news in our village, this morning," her aunt said. "They were saying after chapel that a girl just Rachel's age got herself—you know—into trouble. Isn't it, Dafydd?"

"Ssh, Delia, cae dy geg!"* Uncle Dafydd muttered.

"You can't be careful enough with girls that age, can you?" her aunt persisted.

"Oh, I know!" her mother said, turning pink, and stuffing some sponge cake into her mouth. Some crumbs trickled on to her chin.

"Both of you girls should pay attention to your aunt!" her father said.

Rachel winced, and stabbed a piece of sponge cake with her cake-fork.

Just as she began to feel that her aunt and uncle would never leave, they decided it was time to go. Whilst her parents went out to the car to see them off, she ran upstairs, tore out of her starched cotton frock, changed into slacks and a blouse, sneaked

*cae dy geg = shut up!

downstairs and out through the back door.

She ran down the hill, past the British school with its boys and girls entrances, past the Ship Inn and The Bull, past the one shop that dared to open on Sunday—a small café that disgusted the ladies going to chapel in their pinned hats and pastel coats. Two boys leaned out of its doorway.

"Hey, girl, where you going?" one shouted coarsely.

"It's Rachel Jones," the other said, surprised.

She ran along the row of cottages that straggled into the countryside, her thoughts like clothes boiled and agitated in a washer. By the time she became aware of the warm air stroking her face and the scent of tangled flowers from the hedgerows, she had run past several farms and arrived at the next village. The independent chapel was here, where Aunt Delia used to take her before she married, determined to save her from the Catholic church. All she could remember of it was the darkness inside and the hens clucking by the open door. She turned left and headed down a road which sloped towards the sea. Thomas' farm was somewhere in this area but it was time she put him out of her mind. She picked up speed and concentrated on the sound of her footsteps. A seagull flying away towards the horizon took her heart with it.

"Rachel Jones," she lectured herself, "you can't stand things the way they are, so what do you want?"

"I want to — live!" she answered.

"You are living already."

"This is not life!"

"Then what does it mean to be alive?"

'What are you going to do with your lives, anybody, hmm?'

Fr. O'Connor wanted her to become a nun. He had taken her aside after Mass again that morning.

"Are you sure now you haven't got a vocation?" he asked.

A vocation! Last Saturday she had wandered off into the countryside and walked for miles—right up to that village on the north coast—to give herself a chance to think. With no answer to take back, she had ended up waiting for the bus in a café which smelt of stale cake. It was full of hostile-looking girls.

"There's a hole in my bloody nylons," a broad-shouldered girl with her legs on a table said. "Give us some of that luscious red varnish of yours, Lily, before it ladders." She dabbed some on her thigh. "You're new!" she shot at Rachel with a wary glance from under bushy eyebrows.

Rachel smiled awkwardly.

"Looking for some excitement, are you?" Nylons persisted. "Well, this town is a dump, let me tell you."

Rachel smiled. "I haven't been here before," she said. "What is it really like? What do you do?"

"Oh, God. What do we do? Tell her!" Nylons said.

A girl with her teeth in an Eccles cake sniggered.

"Work in a factory on the new industrial estate," Lily of the Nail Varnish replied, with a slight smile in her earnest blue eyes. "Making plugs, it is."

"Don't look for work there, kiddo," Nylons said with a twisted smile. "Pennies to be bored out of your mind!" She took another swill of her whipped coffee. "Finally you get married," she added, turning to the others, "and then what?—You dust the china and gossip all day like old Mrs. Parry down the street."

"I don't know about that," Lily said. "There's one or two I wouldn't mind being married to myself."

"Duw, that girl Dilys," Eccles Cake butted in, "I reckon she got pregnant because she was bored out of her flipping mind. Then the swine who done it—that la-di-da twirp relation of the boss from Lancashire—just packed his bags and left town, isn't it?—Soon as he heard the good news.—If you ask me, boys get all the fun."

"I don't know about that," said Nylons. "My kid brother's always moping about the place."

"There must be something we can do!" Rachel said, feeling panicky as they all turned to stare at her. Lily smiled.

"What we need is a revolution!" Rachel laughed, brandishing her teaspoon, "If we don't like things the way they are, we shall change them!"

There was a lot of talk, then Nylons patted her shoulder. "I don't want to be the one to disillusion you, kiddo," she said. The talk died.

"I want to—live. I want to live," she almost cried as she walked down the road.

"What does it mean to be alive?"

Suddenly she saw the sea sparkling at the bottom of the hill and started to run towards it. The wind chased her. Movement could be a prayer. Breathing could be a prayer of awareness. They did that somewhere. She had read it. She tore off her shoes and felt the warm sand between her toes. This was not enough! She wanted to plunge into the waves, to feel her arms pulling the water. Cautiously, she looked around. It was Sunday, which would make it worse. She imagined how shocked the neighbours would be.

"Duw, can you think of any thing so sinful?"

"Something wrong with that girl, I'm telling you. She's got no sense."

"Well, she's Catholic, isn't she?"

"In the nude!"

She saw them in a group, brandishing their peg-baskets, irons and tea-pots.

"Don't do it, my girl," her aunt said, the mole on her cheek bristling, "Haven't you been taught better?"

"Do it, Rachel," a seagull screamed as it wheeled overhead. 'Do something real. Don't be trapped."

She undressed, ran through the rippling sand towards the waves, and plunged straight into the water. Its chill knocked her mind clean of everything. She swam furiously until she ran out of breath, then turned on her back and floated. She was part of the sea's movement, part of the wind, part of the sun and the hills and the sky. As if this was her baptism, she spread out her arms and plunged below the surface of the water.

Afterwards, when she ran back up the beach and dragged on her clothes, she wondered how she was going to explain her wet hair, now plastered to her neck and shoulders. And how was she going to explain running away? At least her hair might dry. The afternoon was still hot.

She slipped into her shoes and started to walk home. Her pace was slower now. The longer the delay the worse the scolding she would get, but she was reluctant to return to a home full of shadows and tension. If only things were as uncomplicated as they were when she was a child. Thomas had liked her then. They had come bouncing along this road in a big old Morris, shrieking with laughter, and singing "We Three Kings" at the top of their voices. Mr. Owen, Thomas' dark-haired father, was driving, and smoking a Christmas cigar.

"The first angel lost her knickers," Ted exploded. "Right in the middle of the play. Remember?!"

They all collapsed with laughter again.

"She said the elastic snapped just as the wise men arrived with gifts," Ann croaked.

"Help! Help!" Non shouted. "I'm going to pee in my pants in a minute if I can't stop laughing."

"A-ha-ha!" Ann shrieked.

"Duw, duw, I didn't realize what kind of mob I was taking home with me, did I?" Mr. Owen said. "Thought you were such ladies and gentlemen!"

There was a lot of secret giggling in the back of the car. Thomas looked across at her, and they laughed till they clutched their sides.

"Oh, come all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,"

Mr. Owen sang out in his famous baritone. They joined in and were singing when the car slowed down and turned on to the track down to the farm. Mrs. Owen was at the door to greet them and there was a huge log fire in the kitchen. They had turkey and mince-pies and crackers and games. When her father arrived to fetch her, Thomas hid her in a cupboard so that she could stay longer, but she was found and hauled off protesting into the night.

She tore a wild rose out of the hedge and pricked her finger. She had Thomas on the brain! There was no point remembering

how much he used to like her. She sat down by the side of the road to pull out the thorn.

Her swim had made her drowsy and she leaned against a farm wall, watched the weather-vane on a nearby building as it moved idly in the summer breeze, and was vaguely aware of cows lowing, someone whistling, and a dog barking. She closed her eyes. The scent of hawthorn and honeysuckle and the drone of bees and blue-bottles in the hedge drew her towards sleep. As she sank into it she struggled to surface. Without seeing or hearing anything, she felt sure that someone was standing nearby. She forced her eyes open. Boots! Trousers covered with soil. A dog gave her a wet lick on the nose.

"Hey, Dai boy, stop that!" a voice laughed.

She opened her eyes wide with fright and embarrassment.

"It's Rachel, isn't it?" the voice said.

She looked up and stared. It was Thomas.

"You look exhausted," he said. He held out a brown hand and hoisted her to her feet. "Our farm is just down there. Why don't you come and sit down for a while?"

He pushed open a squealing farm-gate. A white pony stuck its head over the hedge and whinnied. He stroked its muzzle and gave it a lump of sugar from his pocket. The pony rubbed its head against his chest, sniffing for more sugar.

In a trance, she followed Thomas down the path to the farm. They left the farm-yard with its haystack and red-footed hens, and went through a gate into a small rose-garden and up to the farm-house door.

"Just take off my boots," he said.

She was apprehensive about going inside. Was it really all right?

"Go in. Don't be shy," he said.

She pushed open the door gently and walked into the kitchen. A shaggy grey cat dived away from her and hid under a cupboard in the corner. There was nobody else at home. The red and black flagstone floor made the room cool.

"Why don't you sit down and rest?" he said, coming in behind her.

She sat on the sofa beneath the window. The window-sill was full of flowering plants.

"I'm afraid I scared your cat," she said.

He smiled, put the kettle on the stove, and got some bread, cheese, and apples.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"I'm all right."

He came over and felt her forehead, comparing it with the temperature of his own, and looked startled when he touched her damp hair.

"The sun is hotter than you think, isn't it? Would you like some aspirin?" he asked.

"No. I'm fine. I was just—sitting there," she said, and laughed.

He went away, came back with tea, and poured some out for her. When she drank it, he watched, which made her nervous. She was sure that her hand was shaking.

He bit his thumb. "What are you going to do when you leave school?" he asked.

She chanced a quick look at him. His hazel eyes were quietly fixed on her. Her attention was caught by their warmth and kindness, and she wanted to talk to him.

"I've been wondering whether I should become a nun," she said.

He stared, it seemed for several minutes. "I don't understand," he said.

"Yes," she said. "It's bad enough to be a Catholic around here, isn't it?!" She gulped some tea and put her cup down with a nervous bang.

He touched her hand. "I don't mean that," he said. "That Catholic-Protestant nonsense never mattered to me. But—why?"

She flushed and did not know what to say. If she told him the truth—that all she knew is that she wanted beauty and life—he would think her insane. "It's difficult to put into words," she said.

The room was silent. Somewhere outside a blackbird started singing.

"Thomas," she said finally, getting up. "I really appreciate—. You've been so kind."

"You don't have to rush off, you know," he said.

"I should go. I'm expected at home."

He looked at her silently, and then got up. The shaggy cat, perhaps sensing that he was about to leave, ventured out from under the cupboard and mewed. He picked it up and stroked it. Rachel touched its warm fur, realizing with some embarrassment that she envied it. Her eyes met Thomas'. She blushed and turned away.

He put some apples in her hold-all and led her back to the farm entrance. They were both silent and awkward. He closed the gate behind her and leaned on it for a moment gazing at her. Then he touched her hand and said, "Rachel—." He turned back so suddenly that she did not hear the rest. She watched him disappear, then turned away and headed home.

AR DRAWS Y DWR — ACROSS THE WATER

I

On every turn of the road was a chapel, its graveyard announcing, "It's lost. It's gone." The island had lost too much. It had been discovered as a tourist paradise, a place to retire, a place to own a second home, a British colony for small industrial estates and an atomic energy station with its mushroom-cloud of anxiety, but these were unreal compared to the something lost. Rachel recalled the Celtic myth of a city lost beneath the sea and felt as if she were straining to hear, with anguish, cathedral bells too deep, too far away. And yet she wanted to leave.

The idea of going to university had excited her all Spring. Her father drove her hundreds of miles to the interviews. She wore a new navy-blue suit and rolled down the car window to be in greater touch with what she saw: new towns, new roads; a white pony under a mountain-ash, a cracked street with terraced housing and a grocer's shop.

She had never belonged to the island. Her Midlander mother had moved here to be saved from asthma. She had meant to leave when she was cured and strong—she told them—but had fallen in love with a Welsh boy, married, and settled down. All her English middle-class values settled with her: hands off the table, and try not to speak that dreadful Welsh! Rachel grew up apart from most

of the other Welsh children.

Her mother brought an alien religion—Catholicism (since one side of her family was Irish). Bravely, she withstood the sword-sharp tongues of her Welsh in-laws and had Rachel baptized into the One True Faith. Rachel had no need for King Arthur's Knights when she was growing up. Her godfather, Uncle Llewellyn, assumed heroic proportions in her mind. Her mother told her tales of his kindness, of how he defended her, "the new English girl," against his own clan. He was dark-haired, a poet as well as a carpenter.

"The truth of the matter is, Gwen," her father said, listening to these tales, "he had a very soft spot for you."

"Oh, stop teasing, Arthur," her mother answered, "he hated bickering meanness, that's all."

To Rachel's delight, and her mother's dismay, her godfather ran away to sea. He sent her a treasured doll from Spain, and bells from Japan that tinkled in the wind, before vanishing forever.

"Cain!" said one of the clan. "He always was the black sheep. He never belonged!"

Her baptism led to all those years of going to church in frilly frocks and white sandals, whilst all the other children were going to chapel to sing lusty Welsh hymns. At least it was romantic to feel like an early martyr making the Sign of the Cross and climbing up a rickety ladder into a dark rented hay-loft for Mass. ("Ooh, Mummy, why do we have to go up here then?"

"Careful! Hold tight to the rungs!"

"Why's the priest drinking out of that cup, Mummy? Won't he give us any after we climbed?")

The stable which the parish later converted into a permanent church was far less glamorous, even if it did remind her of Bethlehem.

She did not belong. She did not even feel at home inside her own skin. At the senior religious instruction class every Thursday evening, Father O'Connor laid stress on the sinfulness of the body.

"Don't you be looking at your selves in mirrors," he said. "Nor following your wicked inclinations. Lust is a Deadly Sin. Oh, 'tis indeed! And you know the consequences of that to your immortal souls now, don't yer? Oh, yes! Indeed yer do! Pray to the Holy Virgin Mother of God to strengthen you against the filthy temptations of the Divil and save you from the Fires of Hell, the Fires of Hell!"

He frowned like the angel of judgement on the Last Day, until she felt that she was made of equal parts clay and sin, and prayed to be spared. But then the slanting rays of sunlight straining through the dusty window made her long to race away—to run barefoot through tall grass, plunge into the river, race again through grass, heather, sand, until she dropped.

"What do they say about—it—in chapel?" she had asked Ann Griffith, while she bit her nails to the quick.

"What should they say?" Ann calmly answered, taking a deep drag on a stolen cigarette.

"Our priest says—sex—is sinful," Rachel said. "Beware the world, the devil, and the flesh, he says. What-is is bad, and must be overcome."

"Funny lot, you are."

"You're not supposed to talk about it. I'm committing a venial sin right now! You're supposed to confess to every word, thought, deed. And omission. No—in this case, omission does not apply!"

Ann Griffith stared at her. ""Duw!" she said, flicking half-an-inch of cigarette ash into the ashtray of her father's office, which they broke into through an unsound window whenever they wanted to talk in private, "I don't understand your priests. It's not in the Bible—so where do they dig up such rubbish? Catholics!"

Rachel felt stung. "Well—they must think that—we should live for a higher life, apart from the one in this world. I mean—we're all going to die, aren't we? You can't get round that." She stumbled about defensively. She would prefer to lose the argument but wanted to make a better showing than this. She picked up some ammunition: "Doesn't it say in the Bible—somewhere in St. John—something like, 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world, but—um, if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him'?"

Ann Griffith squinted at the ceiling, trying to remember. "I thought Catholics weren't supposed to read the Bible," she said, as though Rachel had trespassed on sacred Protestant property.

"And what about all those hermits," Rachel continued, "leaving the world to worship God on some rock of an island?" She swept her hair behind her shoulders and took a deep breath.

Ann Griffith ran her hand through her brown permed hair. Then she wagged her cigarette in triumph. "But we live in this world, don't we?" she said. "We live in this world—that's the whole point. Don't you see?"

Beware the world, the devil and the flesh, Rachel recalled. A vision of the sun setting over the marshes near the sea flooded her mind: red sun, distant hills, curlew crying. She loved this Valley of Tears and wanted to cherish its colours and sounds.

"Too serious, you are," Ann said, touching her sleeve.

Rachel smiled at her. Too often she felt left out: not Welsh, not Protestant, not English either. Now she felt drawn into some inner circle of relating and wished that it could last beyond the moment. Her cardigan sleeve felt warm.

"I've got another cigarette," Ann said, lighting up expertly.

Rachel took a long drag as a sign of their friendship. "But to be honest, Ann," she coughed. "My father's chapel and as Welsh as could be, but he's just as strict. Maybe more so."

"How's that?" Ann said.

"Well, when I was twelve—."

"Yes?"

"It's hard to talk about."

"Oh, go on!" Ann said, all attention. "I'm your best friend, aren't I?"

"Well—my cousin from Liverpool was visiting us," Rachel said, "and he—we—decided to have a midnight feast. So at midnight I crept into his room with a Mars bar and a jam sandwich."

"Yes?" said Ann.

"We heard my father—my dad—coming up the stairs. I hid behind the door. But he'd heard our voices, you see. He came in shouting—and grabbed me and dragged me to the top of the stairs." —She put her hand to her forehead. —"Then he threw me down." She had banged her head, but it was not the physical pain that hurt.

"You're never serious?" she heard Ann say. "You mean he thought that you—?"

"Yes."

Ann forgot to smoke her cigarette.

"And another thing," Rachel said, "remember I told you how much I liked Thomas, how kind he was?"

"Oh, yes," Ann said, smiling. "You told me about the farm. And then you went on about the way he looked at you. You were obviously—"

"Never mind!" Rachel said, feeling her face burn. "He told me that he liked me too."

"You never told me that!"

"Well, you weren't in school that week," Rachel said. "And then it all turned out so badly. — We were going to cycle to the beach together, and I was supposed to meet him at the cross-roads outside town. —Anyway, my mum and dad got suspicious. My mother said something about I'd better not be going out with any boy. My father looked over the top of his newspaper and sort-of glared. I said I was going cycling alone and rushed off. I was scared to death! I mean, I was worried in case they hadn't believed me, and I thought I wouldn't be able to say a thing to Thomas, and we'd just ride on and on in silence!"

Ann laughed. Perhaps she could not imagine such shyness since she could look at that booklet under her bed any time. "How to Date" it was called. It was cut into sections: What to Wear on your First Date, Dating Etiquette, That First Kiss, About Petting, How to Talk to a Boy. "Show a keen interest in his hobbies," it said in heavy italics. "Everyone loves to talk about themselves." "Remember your reputation and hold on to your self-respect," it said. It was full of adverts about gargles to freshen your mouth: "B.O." a girl whispered into her friend's ear; Tampax for Freedom; lipsticks, nail polish, perfumes, creams for an unblemished face. What was the best way to get rid of underarm hair and fuzzy

legs? pimples? blackheads? irregular features? lack of poise? excess fat? warts?! Rachel imagined women peering into a million mirrors, sniffing themselves all over, tongue-tied.

"But it wasn't like that at all," she continued. "As soon as we met he smiled and I felt better. We started talking and laughing. After a few miles we took a rest and climbed into a field."

"Oh, yes!" said Ann.

"We only wanted to talk, Ann Griffith! He put his arm around me, though!"

"Very necessary for talking," said Ann. "This is getting good."

Rachel laughed and remembered his mouth. It was too close to hers and made her shiver. Something must be wrong with her! She knew that she was not supposed to feel like that, and had not the year before. Instead, they hated one another.

"Get away from me, Rachel Gwen Jones," he had shouted whenever he saw her. "Girls are stupid!"

"Don't you talk to me like that, Thomas Morgan Owen!" she answered. "Farm-boy!"

If he realized that she was staring at his mouth he would think her awful—or he might kiss her!

That manual the nuns had given her at that weekend retreat had said something like: "An affectionate kiss or hug may be excused, but do not indulge in them too often for fear that they may

lead to sinful involvement. They are best avoided. Keep yourself pure like St. Teresa, the little flower of Jesus. Remember that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost! If your Protestant friends doubt this, tell them to look it up in their Bibles!"

She wanted to be close to Thomas, but ought to move away. If he kissed her, anything might happen, and she would have to confess the details to Fr. O'Connor. Anyway, she did not know what to do. Yes: she had kissed all her aunties and uncles, fidgeting to get it over with fast, but this would not be the same kind of kiss. She started pulling up bits of grass and remembering all the half-remarks and high-school innuendos: something about tongues in mouths; the boy in the back desk giggling and blushing when he had to read, "Intercourse between the two nations was good"; the French teacher grinning when he told them that it was useful to know how to deal with French letters; the history teacher staring at her breasts until she wished she could hide them inside her desk. She tore up more and more grass. His free hand closed over hers. She looked up and loved his dark smiling eyes and the way his black hair fell over his forehead.

"And d'you know what happened?" she demanded.

"For heaven's sake, tell me!" Ann said.

"My father turned up in his car. He must have followed me."

"What?"

"He grabbed hold of me, and pushed me towards the car. I wouldn't sit in the front. I sat in the back. They had a terrible row in Welsh while my father strapped my bike to the luggage rack. I wanted to say something to Thomas but I couldn't. I just choked. My father drove off shouting how disgusting I was. He'd never trust me again in his life. He told me to go to my room and stay there when we got home. There'd be no supper. My mother asked him what on earth ailed him this time, and they had another of their famous quarrels, and then they both turned on me—."

"There's silly!" Ann said. "I know some chapel types are strict, but I've never heard of anything like that."

"You must have!" Rachel exclaimed. "Look at some of those Welsh plays we've been reading: Son becomes Actor—Vicar father raves about Sin!"

"Just because we read a play like that last month," Ann said, upset by this image of Wales.

"Anyway," Rachel said, "my mum and dad can row as much as they like—and they're at it every night—but what gets me is—Thomas was so angry about what my father said that he's keeping his distance." She brushed a tear off her face.

"He'll come round, Rachel," Ann said, coming to sit beside her on top of the desk. "Listen! Where d'you think we'll be in ten years' time? You might even be married to Thomas for all I know,

and have five or six kids. Think of that!"

Rachel smiled and dried her face. "And who do you want to marry?" she asked. "Is it Dafydd Williams?"

Ann giggled. "Don't tell a soul," she said, "but I think I prefer older men. More—mature, aren't they?"

HALF-PAST NINE! She stared at the plastic alarm-clock on top of her desk and started to pace the floor. Most of the evening was gone and there was so much to study. She sat down in the wicker chair, opened a book, and read:

"The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."

"Rachel! Hey, Rachel!" her youngest sister shouted from the bedroom next door. "Rachel!" The call got louder. She closed the book and walked out on to the landing. From here she heard the wind in the chimney and her parents quarreling downstairs.

"For Christ's sake, Gwen! Don't nag me about new furniture now. Can't you see I'm tired?" her father yelled. The wind wailed.

"Rachel?" Myfanwy said more confidently, seeming to sense that she was standing there. Her bedroom door was ajar to catch the light on the landing. She was afraid of the dark. There might be ghosts lurking in the corner of her room.

Rachel walked into the dark room and sat down on the edge of the bed. She could see the shape of her sister's large dark

eyes and snub-nose in the rays of light from the landing. She peeped out from the blankets like a robin in its nest.

"Why can't you sleep, muffin?" she asked, stroking her fluffy hair.

There was no-one she loved so much in the whole world. Not even Thomas. Why had she shouted at her so much lately? "Shut up! You're disturbing my studies!" Pompous bully! And was she studying? Her other sister, Irene, had told her not to be so strict. "She needs you," she had said. "You're her eldest sister and all you do is terrify her."

"Rachel, will you crack some nuts for me?" Myfanwy asked, snuggling up to her. "I'll always remember you cracking nuts with your desk-lid, even when you've gone away.

"O. K., Myfi," Rachel said, stroking her sister's hair back off her forehead. "One order of nuts, coming up!"

She went back to her bedroom, put out the desk lamp, and cleared the top of her desk. There were some hazel nuts in the bottom of her satchel with some sweet withered apple-skin and a scrunched-up note from Ann Griffith saying, "Look at Will Evans—he's finally got hair on his face!" She extracted some nuts and started to crack them open, carefully. She did not want to harm the desk. Her father had made it for her when she started high school. He was proud of his carpentry, and proud of her. She traced the grain of the wood with her fingers. It was a little rough

with knots in it.

She used to get along so well with her father. On Saturday afternoons they used to go for walks and collect mushrooms, berries or wood together. When a fire-cracker went off too close to him one Guy Fawkes Night, she was desperate until she realized that he was unhurt. He spent hours helping her learn Welsh poems she was afraid to forget when reciting in front of the class, and was overjoyed when she won a camera in that poetry competition, and came first in those races. He loved her to win, and ever since that fall downstairs she was full of knots like the wood and could not talk to him. Sighing, she threw the nutshells into the waste-paper basket and picked up the kernels to take to Myfanwy. The wind had risen in the pine trees. She glanced outside as she left the room. A storm was coming in from the Atlantic.

II

"So, she's going across the water into the big bad world tomorrow," her bachelor uncle William teased on that last Sunday morning as he warmed himself in front of the fire and swivelled a glass of port in his hand.

"Why do you have to go to a university so far away?" her great aunt complained. "And out of Wales too? Your first choice indeed! There's a place much closer. I know your mother agrees with me. She tells me you're getting too hard to handle—too big for your boots!" She was trying to warm her skeletal hands by the

fire. There was a black hymn-book in her lap, and her white hair was still pinned underneath her Sunday hat: maroon with felt flowers clipped to the side.

They had just been to chapel and were staying for Sunday dinner.

"Diar, Aunty Myfanwy, it's only a hundred miles," her uncle laughed.

"Further than I've ever been,"—her aunt's thin lips trembled; the firelight made the lump on her forehead look polished. — "I don't understand this modan world."

"Pregethwr da iawn heddiw, Aunty Myfanwy," her uncle said, trying to change the subject and swallowing a mouthful of port. "Very good preacher this morning!"

"I've only been into the mountains and once to Liverpool," continued her aunt. "O Diawl,* there's a place, with all those big wet buildings!"

Her uncle helped himself to another glass of port. Aunty Myfanwy continued to mourn the state of the modern world. Rachel gazed at the coals in the fire and remembered going over to her aunt's last week to do some sewing. They put a kettle on the fire for tea and stitched away in the quiet room, listening to the grandfather clock tick in the corner. "Embroider your name on your laundry bag, neatly and clearly," the university brochure said.

*Diawl = Devil.

"Half-an-inch blanket stitch. Yellow or red." Was it a joke?

Aunty Myfanwy's house was a place of wonders. They used to love diving into the feather-mattresses and Irene shrieked when she discovered chamber-pots under the beds. "Diar," she laughed, imitating Aunty Myfanwy's accent, "somebody's got a weak bladdar, you know!" In the living-room were oil paintings in gilt frames. In one called, "Hope's Sweet Dream," a woman sat in a rocking-chair with a woollen shawl about her shoulders and a sleeping babe in her arms; her dream of her fisherman-husband's safe return from the sea was painted above her angelic head. Opposite was a picture of the S.S. Titanic, sinking. There was a huge family Bible and many photograph albums. It was hard to believe that those sepia people in strange clothes had really existed and felt the same things.

Aunty Myfanwy made some tea and got some fresh lemon tarts from the pantry. She sipped the hot brew, stared at the fire and talked of the past.

"Owen bâch,"* she said, "I remember when I was first married and we were in the kitchen of the farm. Owen sat me down on his knee. 'Duw, Owen,' I said, 'not in here. People will see us.' He looked at me with that smile of his and said, 'Damn it, Myfanwy, I just don't care!' Think of that! 'Damn it, Myfanwy, I just don't care!'" She got up and hobbled over to a drawer where

*Diminutive.

she still kept a bottle of violet smelling salts.

"A picture of me as a young girl," she said, handing Rachel a familiar photograph of a pretty dark-haired girl in a long dress, standing straight and slim in front of the shop where she got her first job: Peacock's. It still sold buttons, elastic, lace, stockings and gloves.

"And this is Owen," her aunt added, handing Rachel another photograph. He looked a bit like a gypsy with his dark ruffled hair.

Rachel surfaced from the past into the present.

"Thank you, Aunty Myfanwy, for letting me come and sew with you last week," she said. "It was lovely. I won't forget it."

She had caught her aunt in mid-jeremiad. She still tried to look cross but her thin lips quivered. Rachel put her arm around her bony shoulders.

"O cariad bâch,"* her aunt said, on the verge of tears. She pulled a handkerchief out of her sleeve and blew her nose.

"Dinner!" Irene called from the dining-room.

After the roast beef and apple dumplings, her aunt and uncle sat in the living-room so long that her mother got frantic. Then they said good-bye and got into her uncle's new Austin. Her aunt rolled down the window and clung to her arm. She wanted to speak but no words came out, and her old face shook.

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*O, cariad bâch = Oh, little love.

"I'll be back for Christmas!" Rachel said helplessly.

"Rachel!" her uncle said.

She went round to his side of the car.

"Don't you worry about anything," he said. "You have a wonderful first term at university! Duw, you're starting your life, isn't it?!"

He kissed her cheek and she smiled at him. She went back to the pavement. Something pulled at her heart as the car vanished down the hill.

She rushed upstairs to do her packing and looked out of the bedroom window as if she had never noticed the view. It was a clear evening. The wind was chasing some autumn leaves in circles and blowing a seagull out to the sea.

A few years ago, her grandfather had died, followed quickly by her grey-eyed, soft-spoken grandmother. Her grandfather's eyes were almost black, and his thick white hair must have been black when he was young. He was a carpenter, well known across the island. He used to sing, tell stories, and rescue her from her mother. "Duw," he would say, spinning her round the room till she laughed aloud, "this little girl's too serious."

When he became ill, they were forbidden to go near his bedroom. Her father visited him many times but when he came out, said nothing and left for a walk. She ran after her father once and they walked for miles through woods and fields in silence. She

picked some flowers, and he took them and held her hand but still said nothing. When they got back, she could bear it no longer. She burst past the district nurse and threw her arms round her grandfather's neck. His face was brown and his skin dry, but his dark eyes smiled.

"Leave her stay," he said. "Cariad bâch, I want you to run about, swim—enjoy life! Don't let these Puritans get you down!"

He looked as if he would like to laugh and spin her again, but he was gasping for breath. The nurse picked her up in her boxer's arms. "Taid!"* she cried as she was being hauled out of the room, "I love you!" The nurse deposited her downstairs and shook her finger at her but said nothing, or perhaps she was crying too hard to hear. She was sure that this nurse was poisoning her Taid with injections, but she got smacked when she rushed to her mother and begged her to rescue him. "The poor nurse!" her mother snapped. "Doesn't she have enough on her hands without this wicked talk from you?"

Her English grandfather had also died, last year. They had gone up to Liverpool to visit him in hospital with their useless fruit and flowers. They were upset because they could not find the right words to comfort him.

"Look, grandad, what I bought with your birthday money," Irene said, showing off a new blue rain-coat.

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*Taid = Grandad.

He looked away. "I fell and hit my head when I was trying to go to the toilet, and they didn't find me for half-an-hour," he said, trying not to cry. And he had once dived off a pier and saved the life of a girl who had fallen in the water. And had visited them every summer, taught them cricket, and spoilt them with strawberries.

Rachel turned away to the window and watched the icy rain beat against the glass. "Oh, grandad," she said, but did not know how to continue.

"He's seen his charts by mistake," her mother whispered to her father as they left the ward. "He knows it's terminal. Arthur, he knows!" She was trying not to cry.

"Come on, Gwen bâch," her father answered, putting his hand on her back. "There's nothing more you can do."

She thought about her grandfather for weeks after the funeral, thought of him lying in that lonely ward, knowing he was about to die. She used to think that Nature was to be trusted: you were born and had the right instincts for growth and expansion; you began to age, and your feelings closed away from life; when you died, it was as painless as an apple falling off a tree. Now she knew this was false and wept. She stared at the leaves scattered by the wind.

"What are we?" her great-aunt had asked one night last winter as they huddled around the fire in the living-room. She was

arguing, in her eighty-sixth year, that death made life meaningless.

"But even if you die," Rachel argued, "we'll remember you. You mean something to us."

"And what happens when you yourself die?" her aunt persisted remorselessly.

"Well, look at the village, for instance," Rachel said, half-wondering if it was worth looking at. "How many generations of people did it take to build it up? Don't they count?"

Her aunt stared into the fire. The outline of her hands and face and her deep brooding eyes seemed eternal, but she was right. Only genes survived from generation to generation. Well, if life had to be as brief it could also be as bright as a firework! Fine!—but she could not say that to an arthritic aunt of eighty-six!

"Eat, drink, and be merry, and be sure to take your—burp—Alka Seltzer," her sister Irene said from her armchair. Her wide blue eyes were full of mischief. She hated "morbid discussions" as she called them.

Myfanwy spoke across her. "But Aunty Myfanwy, you know so much. We're always learning from you," she said.

Aunty Myfanwy blushed like a girl and smiled. They all cuddled closer to the fire.

"How about a wild game of Monopoly, folks!" Irene had said.

Rachel pulled a new orange sweater and brown skirt out of the wardrobe. She looked at them and felt that she would never

age and die. Youth would last for ever. She held the sweater under her chin and smiled at her hazel eyes and healthy skin in the wardrobe mirror. Back into the wardrobe went the sweater and skirt: she would travel in those. Raising the lid of her desk, she sneaked a look at the bright orange lipstick she had bought to match.

She had gone to Liverpool the previous Saturday and spent all the money she had earned in the summer as switchboard/clerk to buy these things for her new life. It had been the first time she ever travelled alone. Her mother phoned her aunt and made sure that she was met at Lime Street station by her two Catholic cousins, Christine and Brigit. When she arrived, they were waiting on the murky station platform looking angelic in blue and white skirt-waisters and cotton gloves.

"Ooo, Rachel, Grate to see yer-gen. Whear to fearst?" Christine said, as they walked sedately towards the station exit. The three of them exchanged a smile like a signal and broke into a run. They rushed about eating "gateaux" and chips, sprayed themselves with sampler perfumes from department-store counter-tops, tried on everything, smeared cosmetics all over their faces, and scrubbed it all off at the station before saying good-bye.

"Com back, won't yer?" Christine said, buying her a woman's magazine to read on the train.

Rachel tucked a red sweater, some blouses and a pair of jeans into her case. She wrapped a few of her shells and the glass deer she had received from Ann Griffith at Christmas into a mohair scarf, and placed them gently on top of her clothes.

She had not said good-bye to Ann. They had quarrelled without quarrelling. Ann simply stopped talking to her one day towards the end of term, and she never discovered the real reason. Barbara Ann had spoken to her sourly in the same week.

"So, Rachel Jones, all high-faluting and going to university, are you?" she said, rolling her oily green eyes upwards.

And Ann Griffith was not going to university, but to a local teachers' training college. But if that was the reason for her sourness, she must talk to her again.

She went down to the hall and dialed Ann's number. There was a pause before Mrs. Griffith came back to the phone to say, "Ann's out."

"Oh!" Rachel said, not believing her.

"Going to university, I hear?" Ann's mother said.

"Yes—leaving tomorrow," Rachel said.

"Oh, well—I hope you enjoy your new life." Ann's mother sounded warm but ill at ease.

Rachel flinched. "Good-bye, Mrs. Griffith," she said.

She put down the receiver and stood stunned and upset in the hall-way. There was Thomas too. In school he kept looking at her

but never seemed sure, and she was afraid to approach him. Then she saw him going around with a taller, blonde-haired girl from his own class.

"Hey, Rachel!" Myfanwy said, peeping from behind the living-room door into the hall. "We're going to walk down to church together. Then after supper we can sing and play games.—We can get out all our old games!"

"Who's coming?" Rachel said, walking into the living-room.

"No, I'm not going," her mother said, smiling wanly from her armchair by the fire.

It was funny. Sometimes her mother panicked and insisted that they turn the car round and go to Mass when they were half-way to the beach. Then for months she would not go at all, until the next anxiety attack. She told them that when she was young and unwell, she spent hours saying the rosary in front of the statues of Mary and the saints—especially St. Bernadette, who had suffered from asthma. The nuns at her convent school had praised her devotion. Rachel recalled a photograph that she had seen of her mother at eighteen, when she first came to the island. The photographer had painted her eyes baby-blue and her cheeks pink. She had long wavy hair and an innocent smile. Dimly she seemed to remember holding on to her soft mohair skirt ("Mummy, Mummy, are we going to see Nain* and Taid?"), and sensing the sweetness

*Nain = grandma.

and shyness of her young mother. Now there were circles and lines under her eyes which no sleep would ever remove, and her hair was cut and greying. She wanted to comfort her.

Irene walked into the room. She had changed into a straight blue dress and jacket.

"I'm going," she said, arching her eyebrows and smiling.

This was remarkable. At thirteen, Irene had decided that the priest was a silly old fool. For two years, she had divided her time at Mass between pulling faces at the "holy pictures" in her missal and curling her lip in contempt at Fr. O'Connor's sermons. Then she had refused to have anything more to do with it. She was strong enough to get her own way. There would be no more grovelling confession and sweet-toothed piety for her! How had she broken away so cleanly? Rachel felt dark and confused beside her. She identified with the mystic's passionate search for God and yet she sometimes hated Fr. O'Connor and wanted to break free.

She rushed upstairs, threw the last of her things into the suitcase, locked it and changed into her new orange sweater and skirt.

The three of them set off on the mile's walk down to the converted-stable church. The frosty air put them in high spirits, and they linked arms, hopped, skipped and ran. Their laughter echoed against the stone walls of closed shops and quiet cottages. Stars appeared in the darkening east, and a crescent moon.

"I'm going to miss you," Myfanwy said, putting a small mittened hand up to her mouth. Rachel put her arm around her and held her tight.

"Hey," said Irene, "I wonder what we'll all be doing ten years from now?"

"I just wonder about the next three months," Rachel answered.

III

The sun shone behind cloud when she and her father crossed the bridge on to the mainland the following afternoon. It might rain later. There might be a rainbow. The sky made the water look as if it was brooding which made her feel even greater nostalgia.

"Now remember what I told you about looking after yourself," her mother had said as she left the house she had lived in all those years. "Change your clothes if you get caught in the rain. You musn't catch cold. Don't let any silly men bother you."

Myfanwy clung to her arm. Even Irene's smile was uncertain. And now, only minutes later, she and her father had crossed the bridge and left the island behind. She glanced across at him. He had taken the day off from the office to drive her up to university. He had put aside his tweed jacket with the leather patches at the elbow, and was wearing a new grey suit, white shirt, and silk tie. If only she could talk to him! He must be unhappy at home—he

spent the evenings hidden behind the newspaper, running his hands through his greying hair, or asleep in front of the television set. And there was always a row.

"I can't stand living like this," her mother would begin, or, "We'll have to do something about this place!"

"For Christ's sake, Gwen, stop nagging me!" her father shouted back—and they were off. She had lain awake at night listening to them, believing that they were on the verge of divorce.

She looked at him again. He had lost weight since failing to get that promotion after working so hard for it. A few Sundays ago, Irene had said, "Put more cream on his pud—he's beginning to look like an ad for Oxfam!"

She had seen a school photograph of him once. He had an attractive smile (and she remembered how the neighbours used to greet him towards the end of each summer with "Duw, Arthur, you look wonderful!"). He was a star pupil. He told her that he was unable to get a further education because there were no government grants in those days and his family was poor. He had to leave school and get work. Mass-made furniture had almost driven her grandfather into bankruptcy. Her mother said that Nain and Taid kept a stockingful of money under their mattress and could easily have sent him to university, but she did not believe it.

If only she could talk to him.

"Um," she said, "how d'you think the garden will do this autumn?"

"Oh—looking all right, you know," he answered.

They drove on in silence, turning on to the road that led towards the Welsh mountains.

"When we cross the Welsh border," he said, "we're going to stop at the first English pub and have a slap-up meal: chicken and cheeses and pudding, and a good drink, isn't it?" He laughed. He wanted to spoil her.

She looked out at thornbushes and sheep and bare eroded hills with waterfalls gleaming on them like strips of metal under the watery sun.

"I'm going to miss you all, you know," she said, not daring to look across at him, and biting her nails.

"Well, well, well," he said. "Back at Christmas, isn't it? You have a good term, cariad bâch."

* * * * *

It was dark when they reached the university campus. They drove down the tree-lined drive-way and dropped their speed. They were lost. Here and there through the trees, large buildings loomed up at them. A light arched over the door of a building that looked like a chapel. A lamp-post revealed a cluster of nissen huts. In the distance was a lighted clock-face and another building, all glass and lights, that looked like a steamer on a dark river.

"D'you think we should go there?" Rachel asked, feeling subdued.

"Stick your head out of the window and ask that boy waiting to cross the road!" her father said.

"Where?" she asked, feeling her vocal chords go numb.

"Over there!"

It was the first human being they had seen on the campus, standing under a lamp-post and looking nonchalant with his hands in his pockets. She rolled down the window and was conscious of the misty night air which smelt of grass and fallen leaves.

"Excuse me!" she called out. The student strolled across to them.

"We've just arrived. Where are we supposed to go?" she asked.

"Oh," he laughed, "they couldn't have made it easier for everyone! You see that group of badly-lighted, ex-Army huts over there?"

"Yes."

"It's one of those."

He had a B. B. C. voice which made Rachel aware of her accent. She felt foreign.

"What's that building?" she stammered, feeling her throat tighten, and pointing to the steamer.

He smiled at her. She noticed that the top button of his shirt was open underneath his jacket. She felt stupid sitting there in her "best clothes". What she needed was a similar nonchalant façade. She could hardly wait to change into jeans.

"I gather that's the Students' Union," he answered, "but it would be too obvious to put the reception committee in a big, lighted building like that, wouldn't it?"

Rachel smiled at him. She noticed her father grip the steering-wheel. "Um—what's that building with the clock?" she asked.

"I think it's the library—which I imagine most students will avoid as much as possible," he answered.

She laughed and thanked him.

"Why did you have to ask so many questions?" her father demanded as they drove off. "You want to watch these men. Don't be so easily taken in when they try to impress you!"

Rachel felt her face burn, partly from shame, partly from anger.

They parked outside the nissen huts, got out, and slammed the car doors.

"It's that one," Rachel said, noticing two girls emerge from a hut that had a light in the door-way.

There was a short queue inside. Her father straightened his silk tie, buttoned his new jacket, smoothed his hair, and smiled at

everyone until they reached the desk at the front.

"Name?" a girl with a pony tail asked, stubbing out a cigarette in a ceramic ash-tray.

"Rachel Jones," she said.

"From?"

"North Wales."

"Oh, indeed and to goodness," said the girl. "There's marvellous, isn't it? A little Welsh girl!"

Rachel flinched. She heard the people behind her laugh. She felt ready to empty the ash-tray over the girl, but Welsh people were supposed to be wild-tempered (provocation received was never considered), and she was not going to oblige with a show of temper.

"No need to be so sensitive, indeed and to goodness!" said the girl, looking down a list of names. She gave Rachel a room number and directions on how to find the hostel.

"Your room-mate's already arrived," she said.

"You will look after her, won't you?" her father said. "She's never been away from home before."

Rachel was mortified.

"Make sure she behaves herself!" he added as a joke.

Rachel heard people tittering behind her. She felt as if she was being stung by wasps.

The girl stared at her father. "Quite!" she grimaced.

"Duw," her father continued, "what I wouldn't have given to go to university when I was her age. It's marvellous these government grants, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the girl. "Quite!"

The people behind them were having hysterics, snorting and coughing to right themselves. Rachel was furious with her father and then furious with the people who laughed at him. They did not realize that in the country people chatted to strangers and were much more human. Snobs! She walked out, avoiding their eyes, and deciding that she hated the place. Her father followed five minutes later. She dreaded to think what he might have said to the people in the room.

They drove up to the hostel in silence. There was only one suitcase to be hauled upstairs. She realized that her father would soon have to leave, and hung around him, trying to help.

"Duw, I don't need help," he said. "It's not heavy."

She opened the door to her new room. A desk-light was on but the room-mate had already unpacked and gone out. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief and stepped inside. She noticed bookcases, a green curtain flapping in the breeze from the open window, a shocking-pink cardigan over a chair. The room-mate's wardrobe door had burst open revealing silver, rope, leather, gilt belts; strings of beads; a rainbow of shirts and blouses. There was a plastic transistor on the table beside her bed.

Her father put down her case. "Look at that!" he said, approaching a row of enormous shoes which she had not yet looked down and noticed.

She went closer to make sure that she had seen right.

He peered inside a green pointed pair and announced: "Size 10!"

"Good lord!" Rachel said, putting her feet inside a fake-crocodile pair, gripping on with her toes and clattering across the room.

"Fie, foe, fie, fum, I smell the blood of a—Welsh woman!" she intoned.

"Now, now, Rachel, don't be naughty!" her father laughed.

Rachel put them back, staring not only at their size but at the enormous length of the row: green, crocodile, red, maroon, blue T-straps, black-and-silver, brown, cream with a buckle, gilt sandals, fake-leopard slippers, leather boots as big as elephant legs. Her two pairs of shoes—one high-heeled, one flat—were going to look lost.

Her father hesitated near the door and ran his hands through his hair. "Well, Rachel bâch," he said.

Rachel felt her hands turn clammy. "I'm sorry, dad," she said, "that I can't even give you some coffee. You look tired."

"Duw, I'll be all right," he said. He coughed, and gave her a quick hug.

She followed him downstairs to the car and waved as he turned and headed back to the island, waved until she had convinced herself that the occasional light she saw through the trees was no longer the car but other lamp-posts in the distance.

She rushed back upstairs to her room and shut the door. For the first time that day, she realized that she had left home. She was alone for the first time in her life. Before, there had always been her sisters, and gossip over a cup of cocoa, a song, a game, a joke, a squabble, before bedtime. Now there was nothing—except for a giant room-mate lurking outside in the night! The building was as hushed as a deep well. For some moments she stood there feeling sick and overwhelmed, and then she began to recover. She would unpack.

There was not much to do. Her clothes and toothbrush were soon put away. She did not know whether to smile or cry when she pulled out the presents her mother had slipped into her case that morning: The Complete Shakespeare from her uncle; a Parker fountain pen from her parents; a Welsh hymn-book from Aunty Myfanwy; a blue hairbrush and matching comb from Irene; and a huge bottle of "bubble bath" from Myfanwy, bought with the pennies and threepenny bits she had saved for a month in a jam-jar. She laid them all on the table beside her bed with her shells and glass deer, walked over to the window, and took a deep breath of cool night air. She was just gathering enough courage to go out and

explore, when the door opened and a gigantic girl in a black cape came inside. Rachel shrank back into her side of the room.

"Hullo," said the girl, sweeping off the huge cape and hanging it up. "I'm Angie from Sunderland, Tyneside. Who are you?"

"Rachel, Wales," she mumbled, sinking down on to her bed. She had always felt inferior because she was an inch shorter than the national average, and now she felt demolished.

To her dismay, Angie slammed the window shut. "At least you're not one of those snotty Southerners," she said. "Can't stand those cold buggers with their pocketsful of brass." She started to remove her red lipstick and green eyeshadow with cold cream and cotton wool.

"Just arrived, have you?" she asked, pulling off her eyelashes.

"Yes, I have," Rachel answered, wondering in what way their "personalities were matched" as the university brochure boasted.

"I've been looking around," Angie said.

"Did you see anything interesting then?"

"Na," she answered, dabbing pink astringent on her nose and chin. "Dead as a door-nail. I reckon most people haven't arrived. Be a hop on Wednesday, though."

"Yes?"

"Freshers' Ball or something. Somebody at the bar called it the Cattle Market," she said, pulling off a yellow sweater and skirt to

reveal a massive black petticoat. "I've got a steady boy-friend, but he's not here. I don't see why I shouldn't go. I want my fun too. Don't you agree? You got a steady?"

"No, I haven't," Rachel said, watching Angie peel nylons off enormous thighs and calves.

"Well, this is probably a good place to be," Angie said. "Quiet, aren't you?"

"I suppose I'm not used to the place," Rachel answered.

"Straight from school, are you?" Angie said, flicking an extra coat of purple nail varnish on her massive toe-nails.

"Yes."

"I've been working a year. Makes a big difference," she said. "Do you wear a corset?"

"No!" Rachel gulped.

"Nor I. My boyfriend hates those things. Sez he can feel it when we're dancing, all hard and bony. I know it sounds funny but you wait till you've got a steady!"

"I hate corsets," Rachel said.

The stiff white corset she got on her eighteenth birthday was the latest in line of the things her mother had bought her to deal with "feminine problems." (It had started with a pink sanitary belt and a white cotton bra with hooks down to the midriff.) She had buried the corset in the bottom of her drawer, wanting to escape from the shame and embarrassment so obviously attached to such

"sexual" objects by her mother. But the offensive garment was dragged out on washing-day.

"Look at it!" her mother whispered, unfolding it in front of Rachel's face when she got home from athletics practice after school. "It's unused! These things have a purpose. They hold you in. Do you want loose stomach muscles?"

Rachel looked at her father, who was hiding behind a newspaper, and wanted to die.

The same scene was repeated until she put the thing in her satchel one night and left the house.

"To tell you the truth, I threw my corset in the river," she confessed, "and told my mother it got lost in the gym."

Angie laughed and pulled her petticoat over her head.

Rachel felt as if she had just been let off a murder charge, scot-free. "Your mother isn't strict then?" she asked.

"Is she heck," Angie said, pulling out her pyjamas.

Rachel stared at the floor as Angie unhooked her bra. "You've got a lot of shoes," she said.

"I always buy when I see my size," Angie said. "Aren't you going to change?"

"In a minute," Rachel said, knotted up with embarrassment.

Angie turned her back on her, put on her pyjamas and got into bed.

"Damn!" she said. "This blasted bed's too short!"

Rachel looked up to see her two great feet sticking over the end of the mattress.

"I'm going to complain about this!" Angie said. "What do they think women are—dwarfs?" She lay on one side and bent her knees. "Good-night!" she said. "I hope you're not going to keep that light on for long. They seem to believe in glaring white here, don't they? Look at this room!"—she heaved herself up on one arm—"very—stark, wouldn't you say? All white and brown! We must get ourselves posters from somewhere, and ash-trays."

She collapsed back, turned over, and buried her head in her pillow.

"Do put out the light," she muttered.

Rachel put it out. There was nothing left to do but undress and get into bed. She lay there with her eyes open for some time, thinking about Angie, about her family, about tomorrow.

IV

"They'll be here at eight o'clock," Angie said as they stood under a lamp-post on the road leading off-campus.

"Are you sure it's all right me coming to this party?" Rachel asked. "I've never met these people before."

"Positive," Angie laughed. "These people are cool—too cool! Where the devil are they?"

Rachel sat down by the side of the road. Her mind was crowded with impressions of her first week: the library tour, the Freshers' Fall, her first tutorial. As she tucked her student scarf around her neck, she was buying reject mugs from the market with Angie, and receiving an armful of old posters from a tourist agency. Then she was back in her room, helping to paste the posters all over the walls. There was even one of a Welsh rebel castle perched on a rock above a lake. "We'll Keep a Welcome in the Hillside" it announced in bright red print. Whoever produced these tourist things for Wales must have a wicked sense of humour. There was a whole line of blue pottery which declared, "Cymru am Byth!" The tourists thought the "funny language" was quaint, but they were buying the slogan of the independence movement. She cellotaped the rebel castle above her bed.

Angie read out "We'll Keep a Welcome" and asked, "What are Welsh men like?"

Rachel thought of Thomas.

"Of course, you only have to look at Richard Burton, don't you?" Angie continued, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply like Ann Griffith.

Rachel ran down to the full Spring sea and Thomas followed and caught her in his arms. He was staring at her mouth.

"I 'spose they're better-behaved than the lot we've got in bonny Sunderland," Angie reflected. "That mob can hardly wait to

get their paws down your knickers."

Rachel dropped the cellotape on the floor.

"They've got ants in their pants," Angie said, tapping the cigarette ash into their new glass ash-tray. "I mean, I'm not saying that I don't like being felt up now and again, but I don't want to go all the way—do you?"

"Yes," Rachel said from the beach. "I mean—no!"

"You'd better watch it, you know," Angie said.

"What d'you mean?" Rachel asked.

"You'd better not be too naïve," Angie said. "Life is tougher than you think."

Rachel was too embarrassed and annoyed to answer. How dare she be so patronizing!

"Don't look at me like that," Angie said, stubbing out her cigarette. "It's not my fault if we don't live in a perfect world. Anyway, I'm going to the Union to get some pearlized nail polish. Something interesting like blue or lilac, I think." She heaved herself up, got into her mighty cape, and left the room.

Rachel opened the window to enjoy the cool breeze. Paws down knickers! Life is tougher than you think! Environment affected personality. That's what the book on human geography said. People who lived in the north were gloomy and philosophical; southerners were carefree. People who relied on crops and fruit were concerned about timing; nomads had no sense of time and therefore had

a stronger religious awareness (or "oceanic feeling" as the book had called it). Life must seem larger and vaguer to them. The rows of terraced housing subsiding because of the mines, the grimy ship-yards, gas-works, smog, bitter north-easterly winds and black river, which Angie described the other day, must have made her "tough". Seventy (or ninety?) per cent of people in the modern industrial world lived in an "urban area". How was she to survive after her upbringing on a pastoral island with a view across to the mountains?

She went to her desk to get the "Metabolic Pathways" chart the chemistry teacher had given her for taking such an interest in his first lecture. She loved chemistry and its "reactions", just as she had loved dumping sugar in her lemonade when she was a child to see it fizz. The chart showed that a number of chemicals costing less than a pound (most of it water) added up to human life. She cellotaped it to her wardrobe door. This place was far more stimulating than school. "Paraphrase this passage," "Spelling mistake!" and "Which scene does this passage come from and what does it mean?" were being replaced by lectures on the Creation of Matter, Atomic Theory, the expanding Universe, the beginnings of Life, Evolution, genetic theory, comparative religion, and different cultures across time and space.

"Where the devil are they?" she heard Angie say. "It's a quarter past eight already!"

More lazily, she recalled Mavis Lynch's room. It was full of Catholic and Spanish books. There was a gory picture of the Sacred Heart next to a trayful of Woolworth lipsticks and dripping nail varnish, and blood-red rosary-beads on a nail above the bed. Mavis had pounced on her as a "new Catholic" who might help her convert the campus to the One True Way. Lapsed Catholics must be tempted back into the Fold.

"You'd be surprised," she said, "if you knew how easy it is to attract men back to Catholicism if they fancy you, or to interest shy, lonely people if you take care of them!"

Rachel rarely lost her temper but her voice rose with conviction. "Don't you respect people?" she said. "People have to find themselves and be true to that!"

"Aren't you a true Catholic?" Mavis shouted back.

"Yes! That's why I care about people," Rachel said, sweeping out of the room.

Immediately, she wondered how she could square her words about respecting other people's "truth" with authoritarian Catholicism. Mavis Lynch had picked up its mood more accurately. Catholicism was not concerned with the natural growth of a person. It cramped and frustrated them. "How dare you question the teachings of Holy Mother the Church?" Fr. O'Connor had bellowed for years. (The fires of hell. The fires of hell.) Did she feel free

to grow creatively? What a joke!

On Sunday, at the breakfast after Mass in the church basement, Mavis pursued her and tried to make her join a Catholic Action Group. Rachel saw her as an almighty octopus with tentacles reaching across bowl-shaped jam anemones and bread-roll sponges, and took refuge behind a rock-like tea-urn.

"It's twenty past eight," Angie said. "I reckon we should give them another five minutes, then leave."

They heard a rumbling noise on the road and looked around. A beer-bellied man was rolling a barrel towards them, and there was a tall man beside him.

"Angie?" the tall man said, as they approached.

"I thought you weren't going to make it!" Angie said.

"We were trying to smuggle this barrel out of the Union," said the beer-bellied man, "and it wasn't as easy as we thought."

Angie laughed. "Rachel!" she said, pointing to the tall man, "This is John—President of the Students' Union. His friends call him Big John! And this character with the beer is Bear, Treasurer of the Union."

Big John's navy-blue eyes glinted down at her from above his black beard and studded leather jacket. Bear smiled in a meaningful way she could not interpret. They started to walk down the road. John put his arm around Angie.

"Listen," he said, "we're going to make it an all-night party."

"What about hours' rules?" Angie asked. "I've heard stories of people being thrown out of this place."

"They hardly ever check," John said, "but if you're chicken, leave at half-past ten." He picked up a stone and threw it at a tree.

They left the campus road and entered an unlit lane. The barrel banged into a stone.

"Christ!" Bear said. "You'd think they'd have put up lamps by now."

"As well they haven't," John said.

Rachel walked along concentrating on different scents: apple and fallen leaves; tar, cement, brick-dust and metal as they approached the building; fresh paint and after-shave when they got inside; cider, cheeses and wine when they entered the party. The room was full of dancing people. Angie threw her cape over a chair and started doing the Twist with John.

"Got the beer, Id," Bear shouted out, going over to a girl in a black dress. "It better stand for a while, though!"

Rachel threw her duffle-coat over the chair in Angie style but did not know what to do next. She stood at the edge of the room feeling foolish. On one side of her, a student was sitting on the floor, twisting silver paper into the shape of an angel. As soon as he finished, he tore it to shreds.

"So our class got invited to this prof's house," she heard Id say, "and—guess what?—this prof fancies one of the students in

the class, so his jealous wife goes and puts the Pill in our tea."

"What? The Pill?" Bear laughed in answer. "The Pill? Never! Remember that stupid Christian theologian who came here last year to tell us that using contraceptives is like getting into the bath with your boots on? 'It isn't done,' he sez. I thought he was going to take out a lace hanky to mop his perspiring brow!"

"Yeah! The Pill," Id said. "After we'd finished drinking, the bloody woman told us she's put in 'one for each person and one for the pot.' 'What about the men?!' someone shouted. To hell with that! I was trying to calculate whether I should skip a day or not. It sounded as if I'd had a massive dose already. I mean—there were eight of us, for Christ's sake!"

Rachel was out of her depth. She wandered around the edges of the room, looking for a place to sit down, and ended up next to an Oriental student who was clutching a glassful of orangeade.

"Are you a new student too?" she asked.

He turned around and stared.

"Sorry. I not understand," he said. His hand was trembling.

"This is your first year?" she asked.

"Oh! Yes. That right. I arrive last week."

He told her that his name was Akio, and showed her a picture of his home in suburban Tokyo. There was another picture of his parents standing under a flowering plum tree. They both smiled shyly into the camera, and his mother wore a brown silk kimono.

"You see, when woman is young, she wear red or pink; when in sirties, blue or green; when she become old, she wear darker colour," he said. "My parent get old."

"Japan sound—sounds—interesting," Rachel said, feeling homesick.

Akio left before ten o'clock. "I promise my family to do well here, so I get up early and work," he explained. "Bery glad to meet you."

She smiled as she watched him bow to John and leave the room, and then she sat on, biting her nails. Bear shouted out, "A slow number everybody!" and put "A Lighter Shade of Pale" on the turntable.

"Like to dance?" a voice asked.

She turned around and recognized the angel-maker.

It was the first time she had ever danced with anyone, and she had a secret love of dancing. For the last five years at home—whenever the house was empty—she had put on the radio, drawn the curtains, and danced.

As they jived, he told her that his name was Leon. This was his final year and he dreaded starting a nine-to-five job.

"You don't know how lucky you are!" he said. "First year. Everything possible. No ties. Christ!"

He smiled insinuatingly and hugged her, and she noticed Id look up and stare. The record came to an end. She pulled away

from the angel-maker. He ruffled her hair and set off to find them some beer. Id cast an ironic glance at her, and then came over.

"Listen, girl," she drawled. "I don't know who you are, but that bloke's wife's in hospital right now, expecting. You dig?"

She slunk back to Bear and put her arms around his waist. He bent down to hear what she was saying, looked across at Rachel and snorted.

Rachel felt like something that had crawled out of the gutter. She looked around the room for Angie to tell her that she was going to leave, but Angie and John had disappeared. As she headed over to the chair where her coat was buried by others, she noticed a man standing in the doorway. It was the student whom Mavis Lynch had called a lapsing Catholic, the one who stood at the back of the church during Mass.

"Don't let Id upset you," he said, coming into the room. "She thinks she's hip when she talks like that, whereas she's downright insensitive.—A bitch, if you'll pardon my language."

He took off his leather jacket and threw it on top of the chair.

"Can I get you some wine?" he asked.

This must be another Leon or Bear. He was tall, said bitch, and had a leather jacket which he flung over chairs. But there was something about him which suggested warmth, and he was attractive, not fat and greasy like Bear. She looked at his straight dark hair

and the kind expression in his eyes. A high school lesson on Chaucer and physiognomy flashed into her mind, and the way they had gathered in the toilets afterwards to inspect one another.

"You've got green eyes—you're jealous," Ann Griffith said to Barbara Ann. "And I've got a high forehead, so I'm intelligent and cultured. And Rachel's got big eyes so she's innocent, and cupid-bow lips so she's sensuous. Hmm. Make up your mind, woman. Which is it going to be?"

Rachel splashed Ann Griffith with tap-water and they had a water fight and shrieked in the echoing room until a male teacher knocked on the door and ordered them out, but they knew that he would never come inside and make them, so they collapsed on the tile floor and giggled.

"Brisia!"* Barbara Ann said, putting her brush in her satchel. "Brisiwch allan!"*

"Iesu Grist!" Ann Griffith said, tears streaming down her cheeks after laughing too hard. "I can't move!"

Rachel looked at the kind eyes of the lapsing Catholic. "Thank you!" she said.

She watched him go over to the bread and cheeses and bottles, and come back with glassfuls of red wine.

"My name's Alf," he said.

"Mine's Rachel."

*Hurry—hurry out.

He touched her glass. "I've been here two years. Before that I worked for a year as an apprentice electrician. You?"

"Something by that new group, folks," Bear bellowed, putting on "Roll over Beethoven."

"Would you like to?" Alf asked.

"Yes!" she answered.

As she was swept into the dance, she noticed the angel-maker glare and empty a glassful of beer over a rubber plant. She laughed and began to enjoy herself.

"I love dancing!" she shouted.

"I can see that!" he shouted back. "You from Wales?"

"Yes!" She tried to tell him about her island.

They danced together several times.

"Can I give you a lift back?" Alf asked finally. "I'm afraid we're in for it if we stay after midnight."

As she walked out into the starlit lane she wondered what kind of car a student could possibly have, or what kind of student could possible have a car. They stopped next to a bike and he handed her a crash-helmet.

V

"Thanks for the coffee. I'm almost human," Angie said, wiping cold cream off her face.

"That's all right," Rachel said, lying on top of her bed and tearing open the first of two letters she had just collected from

the Union.

"Daddy took us to the beach on Saturday," Myfanwy wrote. "Our favourite one. Remember how we used to swim there?"

There was a tiny pink shell inside the envelope. Rachel could feel the cool wet sand beneath her feet and smell the sea around her as she picked it up.

It was a wonder that the post-office had been able to deliver the second letter. Aunty Myfanwy's handwriting was wobbly. Rachel opened the envelope and read: "I am well (D. V.). There is snow on the mountains this morning, and there you are, far away on the other side! But we'll have some good times at Christmas, won't we?" Rachel placed the letters on her stomach and sighed happily.

"So you had a good time at the party and a boy on a bike is taking you out today?" Angie said, as she smeared on emerald eyeshadow.

"Yes! I've never been on a bike before and first I was scared, but then it was great," Rachel answered. She was riding under the stars again.

"Well—don't fall like a ton of bricks for a bloke you've only just met," Angie said, applying mascara and studying the effect. "Play it cool. Don't let him try anything funny. And don't believe everything he sez just because he's attractive. Look after Number One and you can't go wrong."

Rachel sighed. Angie was beginning to sound like her mother. The only difference was that Angie put on some bright red lipstick in a life-affirming gesture, whereas her mother retreated behind sickness and plastic figurines of saints when life seemed harsh. "He's really nice," she said. "Anyway, what about John?"

"John! I can manage John or anybody else," Angie answered, as she inspected her face and sprayed cologne behind her ears. She glanced at her watch. "How's your bloke going to pick you up here before twelve o'clock. It's against hours' rules."

Rachel sat up. She had been happy and relaxed when she woke up and went to the Union, but now that it was almost time for Alf to arrive she felt nervous. She had no idea what to say to him. "Show a keen interest in his hobbies," Ann Griffith's book had said. "Everyone loves to talk about themselves." She looked at the glass deer and Myfanwy's tiny pink shell for inspiration. A stone rattled against the window. She jumped off the bed and looked outside. There, standing in the brightening morning, was Alf.

"Enjoy yourself!" Angie said, as Rachel slipped into her shoes and coat, and left the room.

Alf smiled as she came out to meet him, and handed her a black and silver helmet. She got on the back of his black Kawasaki.

"Shall we stop at a pub for lunch?" he shouted as he started the engine.

"Yes!" she said, and her hands leapt forwards and clung to him as they swerved away from the curb.

She noticed Mavis Lynch turn round and stare as they headed on to the road that led off-campus, and started to laugh. Devil's laughter, Fr. O'Connor would call it. The road and trees speeding by made her giddy. She wanted to ride over Mavis Lynch, and Fr. O'Connor, and all those years of depressing repressive Catholicism, and saints with stigmata wallowing in glorified suffering. A bit shocked with herself, she sobered down and looked at the countryside: trees; fields; brown and yellow leaves and crimson berries in the ditch; a flash of red as a robin alighted on a sycamore bough; a cow's steamy breath near a hedge; laden apple trees surrounding a cottage with fading chrysanthemums around its door. The wind tugged at her clothes. As they approached the brow of a hill and began to race downwards, she wanted to laugh again. Her toes and fingers tingled and she put her arms around Alf. She wanted to go faster and faster.

They stopped at a pub near a river for lunch.

"Did you like it?" Alf asked, as he parked the bike.

"Yes!" she said.

He kissed her quickly on the mouth and hugged her, and she started speeding faster than before. Confused, she drew away and looked at the river flowing calmly beneath the alders.

During lunch she felt quietened and did not know what to say.

"Did I offend you?" he asked afterwards, as they left the pub and walked along the river-bank.

"No!" she answered.

"Because I like you," he said.

"I like you too!" she answered. She kicked up some leaves and started to run, shouting, "Race you down to that bridge!"

He chased her, caught her near the bridge, lifted her up and spun her around until she laughed. Then he drew her down into his arms and kissed her.

"What's the name of this river?" she asked, breaking away and sitting down on the bridge.

He looked at her and sat down beside her.

"I love the countryside," she said, pretending to be calm. There was a silence. She threw some coloured leaves into the water and watched them float away. "I'm crazy. I grew up on an island and I think I developed a kind of Nature mysticism. Once I told our Irish priest that I didn't know why standing underneath the stars wasn't a sacrament. He agreed with me! He showed me a poem he'd written in Gaelic about it. I couldn't decipher it, and I didn't know what to say. He was sitting there blushing, you know, waiting to hear that it was good!". She swallowed hard, and he put his hand on her back and smiled.

"I missed that, growing up in London," he said. "Sometimes I feel that way when I'm close to someone, but it doesn't happen

often." He put his arm around her and kissed her temple. "Shall we go into town and take a look at the market?"

"All right."

Slowly they walked back to the motorcycle. On their journey into town, she did not notice anything distinct. The trees and cottages and sign-posts rushing by were as confused as her feelings.

"Mind if we visit an old friend of mine?" Alf asked, as they reached the first rows of terraced housing.

"No!" she answered.

He turned on to a side-street and they journeyed past endless rows of dirty-brick housing and factories.

They got off in a street which was empty and lifeless except for a sheet of newspaper scrambling about in the wind. Someone had chalked "Jesus Saves" on a rattling dustbin, but he had disappeared long ago.

Alf stopped, knocked at a door, and pushed it open.

"Come in," he said. "She's often asleep in the back."

Rachel stared at him.

"I met her through a list handed out by the Social Science club," he explained.

"What?" she said, as she followed him through a damp, wall-papered corridor into a living-room at the back of the house. An old lady with a faded paisley shawl around her shoulders was half-asleep in front of a dying fire. Her eyes opened wide when

she realized that someone was in the room.

"Only me," Alf said, throwing his leather jacket over a worn-out armchair. "And I've brought a friend called Rachel along to meet you. Mrs. Stokes—Rachel."

"Oh—oh, Alf," Mrs. Stokes said, and stared at Rachel.

"Shall I make some tea?" Alf asked.

"All—all—right."

Alf disappeared into the kitchen. Rachel looked at Mrs. Stokes and wondered what to say. The room had one small window and was dark. The floral wallpaper above the mantelpiece was stained by dampness.

"I'm glad to meet you," Rachel said. "How are you feeling to-day?"

"Can't complain," Mrs. Stokes wheezed, her hands trembling in her lap. "Can't complain, can we?"

Rachel noticed a black prayer-book on the table beside the fire, and an embroidered sampler on the wall. "Bless this House!" it said, and there was a picture of a cottage surrounded by lupins. Rachel remembered Aunty Myfanwy and smiled at Mrs. Stokes.

Alf came in with a bucketful of coal and put one or two pieces on to the fire. Then he went back into the kitchen and they heard him washing his hands at the sink. He returned with the tea and some bread, butter and jam.

"You've got turnips and brussels sprouts coming up in the garden," he said. "You must let me come and do a bit of weeding soon."

"I'd like to help with the garden," Rachel said, looking out of the window.

"You would?" Alf asked.

"Yes, I love gardening. And we could go to the market and get some stuff for supper," she added, desperately trying to remember the few cooking lessons she had taken in the first year of high school.

"And we could go dancing on our way back," Alf said.

Mrs. Stokes' face brightened as she sipped her tea.

VI

"What would you like to drink, love?"

"Cider," Rachel said.

"And you?"

"Lager and lime," Angie answered, looking straight into Alf's eyes.

"Another of the same," John said, pushing his glass over.

Alf ordered the drinks, sat down next to Rachel again, and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I got a letter from my sister today," he said. "She's sitting her A-levels in June, and she's beginning to feel the tension already."

"What does she want to do?" Rachel asked.

"Become a doctor."

"What about you?" Rachel said. The warmth of his arm and his smile relaxed her.

"So many things interest me—it's difficult to say. But probably social work."

Angie looked at him with narrowed eyes and took a deep drag on her cigarette. John broke a match and flung it into the ash-tray on top of the bar.

"Like to go and take a look at the hop?" Alf asked Rachel as he drained his glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

As they left the bar, Rachel noticed Leon turn around and look at them, then viciously fling a dart at the dart-board.

"Good shot, Leon!" Angie said, and inhaled deeply.

* * * * *

After a breakfast of toast and honey, she came back to their room. Angie had gone to a nine o'clock lecture, saying that she would collapse after being out so late with Bear.

Brr, it was chilly! Rachel turned up the radiator and went over to the frosty window. It was a clear November morning, perhaps the last time they would see a blue sky before winter was over. The glass deer on her bedside table picked up the light. She

started to draw star-shapes on the misted window. "I love him!" she thought, as she traced the path of a falling star across the glass. But she had only known him for two weeks!

She must study, but ended up on her bed with a book of poetry. It was nice just to open the pages and smell the print. She even enjoyed breathing and stretching her arms and legs.

There was a tap against the window. She jumped up, opened the window and leaned out.

"Alf!" she said.

"Would you like to go for a ride?" he called back. "It's a beautiful morning!"

She laughed as she went to fetch her coat, and raced out of the building and into his arms.

"You warm enough?" he asked, tucking her scarf around her until only her eyes were uncovered.

They set off down the road leading off-campus and drove away from the town. The cold air woke her up and she kept close to Alf for warmth. Her thighs gripped the bike. She remembered plunging into the sea one summer, and running through the rain; and suddenly she was rolling down a sand-dune with Alf and tearing off her clothes. She touched her helmet and tried to clear her mind of the fantasy, but instead rolled down the sand-dune even faster; and then they were running along the edge of the sea, running and running. They found a cove and lay surrounded by flowers growing

out of the rock, and he ran his fingers down her side gently.

Alf slowed down, and turned onto a road leading into a wooded part of the countryside. He slowed down again, parked the bike by the side of a stream, and unbuttoned his helmet.

"Blimey, you were holding on tight!" he said. "You weren't afraid?"

"No!"

"Shall we walk for a bit?"

They followed the stream into the forest which was sheltered from the wind, and warmer. Near a stile which led into the heart of the forest he drew her towards him, and kissed her.

"I love you," he said, unbuttoning his coat and hers and drawing her close. "I'd walk a thousand miles across broken glass for you."

She laughed and looked into his shining eyes. "I love you too," she said, and hugged him.

He kissed her lips and throat, and started stroking her breasts.

"Um—Alf!" she said, breaking away, and holding on to a tree for moral support.

He came up behind her and put his arm around her shoulders. "I meant it, you know," he said. "Don't think—"

"It's—"

He turned her around to face him, looked into her eyes, and started to kiss her again.

"No!" she said, breaking away and clinging to the tree.

"Rachel," he said, stroking her back and kissing her hair. "Rachel?"

* * * * *

"What is Moral?" Rachel bit her nails, stared at the dull afternoon sky, got up and looked at her chemistry chart and tiny pink shell, inspected Angie's line of shoes (she was out in the crocodile pair), and sharpened her pencil again as she tried to answer this question for her Discussion Group in a way which would spark an hour's argument. It was an intangible question, and she had two days left to think before answering it. Fr. O'Connor would take ten minutes over it. He would list the Ten Commandments and say that whoever broke them, and their ramifications, was immoral and would be cast into "an everlasting fire prepared since the beginning of time by Satan and his angels." That would give the group a turn! If someone protested that turning the other cheek was sick and a healthy growl more honest, Fr. O'Connor would say that human nature was fallen and not to be trusted. Honest responses? —What self-indulgence!

Rachel traced the lines on the shell with her finger. Brought up in a church opposed to Nature, she had spent too many days near the sea, too many nights looking at the stars. Her body had

absorbed sunset and moonrise; sea, sand and stars; flowers and mountains. The only thing which made sense was to be part of Nature and to act from the love which flared into consciousness. But her consciousness was snagged. In it were all sorts of fears and hesitations. There were tears in her eyes as she put down the shell.

She could bear it no longer. Her psychology notes called this kind of misery approach/avoidance conflict. "Animal gets food and electric shock in same area of cage. Approaches area, but stops and retreats—approaches again. The nearer the approach, the greater the conflict." One moment she and Alf were in high spirits as she learned to ride his bike or hugged him in the rain—next they withdrew and became irritated. One moment they sat holding hands, sipped coffee and talked, and suddenly the room was full of tension, and they drew apart and had a row about the Middle East. Even Mrs. Stokes had noticed.

"I can't understand you two," she said one evening as they sat around the fire after finishing their "winter vegetable pie" and spiced cider. "You dote on one another. Then you flare up. My goodness!"

Alf looked across at Rachel with the intense expression she had first noted on his face as he stood at the back of church during Mass. She wondered if Uncle Llewelyn had looked like that.

On the way home Alf stopped his bike on a tree-lined road, unbuttoned his helmet and said, "Rachel, if we don't sleep together, we're going to tear one another to shreds."

She almost fell off the bike. "Let me think about it," she said, her mind incapable of any thought.

"Well," he said, "if you decide to, don't worry about anything. Let me take care of things. I don't like the idea of you going on the Pill."

Her mind span. The Pill. The Pill. ("One for each person, and one for the pot." "It's like taking a bath in your boots.")

"Alf, how come it doesn't bother you being a Catholic?" she asked.

He laughed. "I understand how you feel," he said, turning around and touching her hand. "I've been through that too—but I think—. This is what I think. I love you, therefore it's got to be all right. If we're worshipping a God that doesn't understand that, I'm just not interested in Him any more."

She thought about this all the way home.

On the following morning, she went to the library, feeling ignorant for the first time in her life, and made sure that nobody was near when she sneaked a look at sex in the subject catalogue. Seeing a library assistant approach, she flipped the cards to Shakespeare, listed all the books on his comedies, and tiptoed off to find the books on sex. One was like a garage mechanic's manual:

here were the parts, and this is how they were coupled together. She dropped the next one, which cautioned husbands to take care of the delicate feelings of their brides, as she saw another student enter the same book-row. Pushing it back into the wrong place on the shelf, she ran out of the library and down to the Union, wondering on the way whether she trusted Alf, whether she would disintegrate as a person afterwards, whether she could love and be strong and free. The church had taught her nothing but guilt.

In the J mail-box, there was a letter from her mother. ("Change your clothes if you get caught in the rain. You musn't catch cold. Don't let any silly men bother you.") Behind every sentence, she felt the presence of dusty statues of Mary and Bernadette, the plastic container for holy water at home, and the dark tight atmosphere she had known since childhood. ("And try not to speak that dreadful Welsh!") Paralyzed, she sat in the nearest chair and stared at the wall.

In church on Sunday, she wished that God blessed sex because she wanted to be generous and whole-hearted about it. ("Holy" meant whole, hale, didn't it?) She looked at the frigid lines of Mary's statue—the pious stone eyes raised upwards—and noticed the warm colour of Alf's hands, his dark hair. If only the angel had made love to Mary and she was like the earth in summer. If only the Virgin was a life-giving Earth Mother, surrounded by fruit and flowers. She did not understand the church's worship of pain

and sickness and death. ("Think of the glory!" the priest had said that winter she got pneumonia.)

Mavis Lynch was kneeling on her right-hand side. She smelt of Bronnley's lemon soap, fingered a blood-red rosary-bead, and gazed upwards as if God was sitting on a light-bulb.

"Rachel," she whispered, as Rachel left hand-in-hand with Alf after Mass, "I wanted a word."

"Yes?"

"I hope you'll change your mind and join our Action Group. — No, no need to give a hasty answer. —I pray that you come to understand the importance of Catholicism in this world. At least, I hope you realize that we have an obligation as Catholics to set an example on this campus."

Rachel stared at her bulging eyes and heavy jaw, and thought that she could read her mind. Mavis was standing there like Morality smelling of Bronnley's lemon. Her eyes accused her of being "one of those women". 'Nice Catholic girls don't hold hands with a man in church,' her expression said. 'In fact, nice Catholic girls never get physically close to a man until after marriage, when there's a certain debt to be paid!'

Rachel's fantasy of riding over Mavis Lynch and Fr. O'Connor returned as she left Mavis looking disappointed and walked back to Alf. Her fists were clenched.

"What is it?" Alf asked. "Don't pay any attention to Mavis Lynch! She's power-mad."

She wanted to say to Alf, "We shouldn't be here," as she mentally threw her corset into the river again. If only she had been born in a jungle somewhere, free from all this "civilization". She could roll on the ground with Alf like a wild animal, with a tangle of trees and flowers and snakes around her. She looked up at him, guiltily.

"I know," she said. "She always tries to tackle me after Mass."

She was back in the jungle as they walked out into the cool November air, away from English middle-class values, ignorant of the One True Faith.

She went over to the window and flung it open. That all happened three weeks ago, and she was still unable to act, although she had stopped going to Confession. She was sick of sin and only interested in love. "Love thy neighbour" was fun. An examination of conscience was deadly. "Love, and do what you will." She paced up and down. She could not spend another minute in the room. Putting on her coat, she left the unanswered question—"What is Moral?"—on her desk, and marched out of the building and down to the lakes.

On her way she saw Akio, standing ahead in the path, scrutinizing a map.

"Hello," she called out. "How are you? Can I help you?"

"Oh, harrow! I fine, sank you," he answered. "I try to find footpass to cross field."

They walked along searching for it.

"Japanese countryside is different!" he commented. "Rice and mountain. Not sheep and field. Golden brown, not green. Lot of tree. But it is also island. Yes? We have also feeling for sea."

She smiled.

"They say all sea in world is linked," he said. "Even you live on shore of Greenland or south island of Japan, we are all united!"

They found the stile entrance to the footpath.

"Sank you. You are so kind," he said as he climbed over it.

"Enjoy your walk!" she shouted after him.

She walked on, day-dreaming that she was in Japan, wandering through Spring woods, her arms full of flowers. Then she sat down on a rock near the silent lake and her mind became still. A robin's song and the darkening twilight brought her back to her senses. She picked up a flat stone and skimmed it across the lake, then watched as the ripples sank away into the lake's depth. "Love, and do what you will." She stood up and walked back through the deepening greys and browns of dusk.

* * * * *

"You can see the Milky Way tonight," Rachel said, as they stood on the Union roof and watched the sky. "Look!"

Alf brushed her hair back off her forehead and kissed her temple. She looked at him and tried to see the shape and colour of his eyes, and the dimple near his mouth in the darkness.

"I love you!" she said. She opened his jacket and hugged him, and he held her close until she felt as if she was floating along a warm dark river.

"Rachel," he said, stroking her hair. "Come back with me now."

She tried to see the expression on his face.

"Come with me," he said, kissing her hands and mouth. "Don't agonize any longer. Come with me."

VII

"You went very quiet for a couple of weeks," Angie said, throwing the last of her selected sweaters into her suitcase.

"Did I?" Rachel said, remembering how Alf had to hold on to her after they first made love. His unzipped jeans flashed before her mind. She saw the silver cross tangled in the dark hair of his chest as he pulled off his blue sweater. Her ears burned as he touched her and moved inside her again. And it had got wilder every time, but sometimes was slow and romantic.

"Yeah," Angie said, "but now you seem fine."

"What about you?" Rachel swallowed, tucking her skirt and orange sweater into the haversack Alf had lent her so that he could drive her to the nearest railway station. She coughed. "How've you liked the first term?"

"I've enjoyed partying," Angie said, locking her case and starting to apply her make-up. "Of course, there'll be a couple of parties at home, but it's going to be dull after this. And you know the 'steady' I told you I had before I left home?—I've lost interest. I don't know how I'm going to relate to him any more. In fact, I don't know how I'm going to relate to anybody." She smeared on some bright red lipstick.

"D'you think people at home will think we've changed?" Rachel asked, looking out at the falling snow.

"Dunno," Angie said, applying emerald eyeshadow.

"I saw Akio when I went to check our mailboxes for the last time," Rachel said.

He had looked more confident and told her his plans for the holidays. He was going to visit a friend in London, and another in Scotland.

"Now I like it here," he said. "I've settled down. Do you know how I mean?"

"Yes, I do," Rachel said. "Have a happy Christmas!"

This year she had tried to make Christmas pudding, using Mrs. Stokes' cookery book from the drawer with lace doillies and

bone-handled tea-knives; and Alf had stirred in so much brandy that they got drunk when they ate it. Mrs. Stokes turned pink and giggled as they tried to decorate the fir tree they had managed to carry there on the bike. Then they all started; and they laced their tea and sang drunken carols. But it was sad when they left. Mrs. Stokes even came to the door to say good-bye and Rachel hated leaving her alone in the damp house. Lonely at Christmas. She remembered how Aunty Myfanwy kept any birthday and Christmas cards in a box by her chair.

"I'll be glad to come back," Angie said, applying black eyeliner. "Funny, isn't it?"

"But it'll be exciting to see everyone again," Rachel said, putting the last of the things she wanted to take into the haversack. If only Alf could come with her. She looked out of the window but saw nothing except an empty path and snow falling on black boughs. She ran her hands through her hair and started to pace. This was not elegant. Ladies were not supposed to pace. She sat down, sprang up again, and stared at the rebel castle above her bed.

There was a knock on the door and she spun round and opened it. Alf kissed her and cradled her in his arms.

"Oh, hullo!" he said, rubbing his forehead as he noticed Angie. He flushed slightly. "All set to leave?"

Angie looked at him knowingly and put her make-up into a red beauty case. Alf cleared his throat.

"Got you something," he said to Rachel, giving her a candy-striped parcel he had left at the entrance.

She gave him the leather gloves she had wrapped and left out on her bedside table, felt her parcel all over, opened it, and pulled out a black leather jacket.

"Alf!" she laughed, going over to the mirror to try it on. She had arrived in nylons, high heels, sweater and skirt, with a suitcase, and was leaving in jeans and a leather jacket, with a haversack!

"Lovely!" she said.

The expression in her eyes was different. Would her family realize? She felt that her father would throw her out on the street and disown her for far less than lying naked and open in Alf's arms. She rubbed her cheek.

"Well, I'll be catching my bus," Angie said, putting her suitcase and beauty-case on wheels and rolling them towards the door.

"Enjoy Christmas!" Rachel said, standing on tiptoe and craning to kiss her cheek.

"See you next term!" Angie said, tying on her cape. "Goodbye, Alf!"

Rachel unbuttoned Alf's jacket and put her arms around him. "I love you!" she said.

"I know," he answered, running his hands through her hair. "I'm going to miss you." He kissed her face and hands and throat.

"Come to London during the holidays."

"Really. Can I?" she asked.

"You must!" he answered. "I can show you round. It'll be great! We don't exactly live in a palace, but I'd love to have you. Will you come?"

"I'd like to," she said. Her father would roar if she tried to leave. Her mother would be hurt. She would have to convince them, argue, stand up—she was an adult now. "Yes, I will!"

He hugged her.

"I don't want to leave you, you know," she said. Her cheek trembled and she pressed her hand against it to stop herself crying.

"It won't be for long, Rachel," he said, stroking her back. He held her tight, and she was oblivious of everything, until she heard Angie's forgotten alarm-clock ticking away. He must have heard it at the same time because he drew away, folded her coat, and strapped it into the haversack. She touched the chemistry chart as they left the room.

"All right?" he asked as they got on the bike and he started the engine.

She put her arms around him as they pulled away from the hostel, the library; the Students' Union. The journey passed in a daze until she noticed the snow tickling her face and Christmas-tree lights through a cottage window. "O, Star of Wonder," she sang to herself and remembered Myfanwy's favourite carol, "Away

in a Manger." Her chest tightened as they reached the town and sped through the streets towards the station entrance.

"Seven minutes to go," Alf said, as he parked the bike.

She rushed to buy her ticket and they ran towards the steps leading down to the platform.

"It's in!" Rachel said, spotting the Emerald Isle Express.

Unintelligible announcements came over a loudspeaker as they ran down the stairs.

"That's the whistle," Alf said, opening the door of a second-class carriage for her.

She flung her arms around him.

"I'll phone you, love," he said, holding her close and kissing her.

People stared at them. The whistle screeched again and the train started to move. Rachel only just had time to jump aboard, shut the door, and start to wave, before the train was swallowed by a tunnel. He was gone. She felt numb for a moment and then started to cry. The train emerged from the tunnel and moved away from the town through the snow. Sheep huddled under the hedges; a black horse with frosty breath frisked its tail. She dried her face, straightened her hair, and went to find a seat. It was all right. She was going to stay with Alf in London.

The train began to pick up speed. "Going home, going home, going home," it rattled against the rails. Soon she would be riding

between the sea and the hills and would catch sight of her island through the snow and twilight, and her family would be waiting at Bangor station.

VIII

"What is it this time?" she asked Irene, as she listened to her parents quarrel in the kitchen. "I might as well not come home!" She kicked the tiled hearth. The remark was unfair. The first days at home were wonderful. They sang all the way home from Bangor station, went shopping for a Christmas tree, decorated the house, sat around the kitchen fire with wine and the smell of baking, talked, and forgot the cold outside. Then the novelty died. The quarrels began. She realized that her ten weeks away had left an unbridgeable gap between her parents and herself. She was irritated when they treated her like a child. And that night Alf had phoned, her father came into the kitchen bristling with anger and said,

"It's a man!" and then stood in the hallway and listened as she answered the call.

"What's this about going to London?" he demanded afterwards, his face turning red.

She explained.

"Over my dead body!" her mother said.

Her father said nothing, either because he was seething with rage or because he was torn between wanting to spoil her and kill

her.

"I want to hear no more about it," her mother said.

Rachel decided to spend the last five days of her holiday in London, even if she had to sneak out of the house before dawn to catch a train, but put aside the problem for the time being so that they could all enjoy Christmas.

"Mum wants to go back to work," she heard Irene say. "She says we need new curtains or something. And dad's insulted. They've been going round in circles for weeks. Mum's always been bored at home, you know."

"Yes," she answered, "I know. She told me once how frustrating it was to bring up three little kids and be stuck in the house on her own."

"Yea!" Irene said. "Hey, listen! Let's go out! If we get a move on we can join Myfi's lot and go round carolling and collecting sixpences for Oxfam!" She fetched her second-best coat from the cupboard under the stairs.

"Good idea!" Rachel said. She took her leather jacket down from a hanger, stroked it, and put it on.

"We're going carolling!" Irene shouted as they left the living-room.

Their mother broke away from the quarrel in the kitchen. "What?" she asked.

"We're going to join the carollers," Irene repeated.

"Don't be late!"

Rachel clenched her fists but tried to smile. They stepped around the last three boxfuls of special foods and small presents waiting to be delivered to old-age pensioners. One was for Aunty Myfanwy. Rachel took a peek: plum puddings, dates, tangerines, chestnuts, pears.

"Dad is generous, isn't he?" she said. She knew that he had taken great pleasure in organizing this "Christmas box" drive, and that he had delivered many of the gifts himself—not just delivered, but stayed for hours talking to people in isolated parts of the countryside. She had gone with him one night, and they visited two old sisters who kept a cat and gave them tea in their front parlour.

The pavement was covered with snow and star-like crystals of frost. They closed the front door behind them, walked down the hill, and paused at the corner of every lane to listen for the carollers. They heard nothing except the wind in the pine trees. They continued down the hill towards the shops and the market square, paused at the corner of Field Street, listened, and looked down its length. Rachel strained her ears to catch phrases of "Hark, the herald angels sing!" or "Away in a Manger". There was nothing. Where had they gone? They listened at the corner of River Street. There was no sound except for the wind rattling the lamp-posts.

"We've lost them," Rachel said.

"Don't give up yet," said Irene.

They turned a corner and saw the market square ahead with its lighted pubs.

"Listen!" Irene said. "I dare us to go for a drink!"

"Well, I'm O.K., but you're not eighteen. What if they catch you?"

"I can pass for eighteen any day of the week," Irene said, wetting her eyebrows into shape.

Rachel dug her hands into her pockets and mined out a florin, five pennies, and a threepenny bit. "I'm rich!" she said. "Come on!"

"The Bull's got a better reputation than The Ship," Irene said. "Let's go there."

They struggled towards the bar through crowds of people reeking of cigarette and cigar-smoke, and bought two ciders.

"Duw, duw," Merfyn the Milkman said, elbowing his way towards them with a big piece of mistletoe. "Rachel Jôs! If you were chapel they'd have you before the Seiat—drinking like some fish! How do they cope with you at your church then?"

"Confession!" Rachel said. ("Bless me, father, for I have sinned: I stole a real bull's eye from Barbara Ann.")

"How d'you confess?" Merfyn asked.

Rachel rubbed her forehead. She had forgotten where she was. "Well," she said, remembering, "You get into this dark box, see—."

"Duw mawr* awful!" said Merfyn. He swung her into his arms and gave her a long kiss.

"There's greedy!" somebody said.

"Got to give you something to tell them in that box, haven't I?" Merfyn said, smiling.

If he knew! If Fr. O'Connor knew!

"Hey, don't be taking me too seriously," Merfyn said, stroking a piece of her hair. "I don't mean any harm. Duw, I wish I was your age again, not creeping up to middle-age, isn't it? Daria**, in my time—"

"He was a right one with the ladies," somebody put in. The people around him laughed.

"Duw, yes," a short spotty man said, gobbing a pint of frothing beer. "Noto-riotous!"

Merfyn laughed. "Pay no attention to this lot," he said, "and enjoy your beauty and youth, cariad—every drop of it!"

Rachel smiled at him, and imagined her father's disgust.

"Speaking of drops," Merfyn said, "what were you and your sister gulping down like lemonade?"

"A hymn, boys, another hymn!" somebody shouted.

The whole pub burst into "Cwm Rhondda"***. People swayed from side to side, smiling at one another, clinking their glasses.

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* Duw mawr = big God (Good God!).

** Daria = damn it!

***Cwm Rhondda" = "Bread of heaven".

Merfyn bought them some more cider.

An hour later Irene and Rachel rolled out into the street. It was snowing again. Rachel listened through the night for the carollers. The snow muffled every sound.

"They'll be back by now," Irene said, "waiting for their Christmas stockings!"

They stumbled home together and sang a rousing hymn outside the back door. There was no response. "O, Star of Wonder!" they sang, desperately loud. A light appeared upstairs. Myfanwy was standing at her bedroom window waving to them in her long night-gown. They waved back and shouted. Irene threw a snowball up at the window.

"Hey, listen, we'd better make up a story about calling in to see Aunty Myfanwy or something," she whispered as they went inside. "Myfi must have got back an hour ago."

There was nobody in the kitchen. The stove was out. The fire in the living-room was dying. Rachel threw more coal on it, and stared at the paper streamers and Christmas tree. She heard muffled voices from the front parlour. "What's going on?" she said.

"That's funny," Irene said. "Let's go and find out!"

They went through the hallway and hesitated before the front room door.

"Well, I suggest we go down right away," Rachel heard her uncle say.

"It's Uncle William," she whispered. She stared into Irene's rounded eyes and opened the door.

"Uncle!" she said. "What's happening?"

Her uncle jumped up and took her hand. "O, cariad bâch," he said.

Her mother glanced at her and looked away. Rachel stared at the three of them.

"It's Aunty Myfanwy," her father said. "She's had a serious heart-attack."

"What? She—"

"No, cariad, no," her uncle said. "I just came up to let you know—the doctor's been with her, and he wants her to rest. I'm sure she'll pull through. Isn't it, Arthur?"

"She was fine when I came home!" Rachel said. "She'd even baked a cake, and she—"

"Yes, yes. I know," her uncle said.

"Your mother and I are just going down to see her," her father said. "We'll give her everybody's love and make sure she's all right."

"I'm going with you," Rachel said, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Duw, there's no point," her father said.

"No, I must go!" Rachel insisted.

"I'm coming too," Irene said.

"Somebody's got to stay with Myfi," her mother said. "Irene you stay—and remember that Myfi doesn't know about it. We might as well let her enjoy Christmas Eve."

Irene looked miserable.

"I'll tell you how she is, Irene," Rachel said as she left the house.

They got into Uncle William's Austin.

"Duw, I'm having trouble with this engine, Arthur. Only bought the damn car last year, isn't it?" her uncle said, as the car moved off slowly down the hill.

"We'll only be stopping a minute or two, Rachel," her mother said. "We mustn't tire her."

They turned on to River Street.

"She's very old, Rachel, you know," her mother continued. "I mean, she's really lucky to have had such a good long life. And what can you do when you're that old, anyway?"

"Duw, yes," her father added. "Her memory's going. Her eyesight's bad."

Rachel made a mental list of the things Aunty Myfanwy could do: she got a book out of the library each week and read it with a magnifying glass; she loved flowers, tea, baking, long walks, discussions, and chapel. She said nothing.

They parked outside the cottage and went inside. Aunty Myfanwy was lying on a made-up bed in the living-room in front of

a small coal fire. A nurse sat by her side in the rocking-chair, knitting a black cardigan.

Rachel stood at the foot of the bed. Her aunt's face looked purple but stubborn. Rachel realized that she was going to fight. 'Fight, Aunty Myfi, fight!' she thought with tears in her eyes. She wished that she could join in and help her: hook her up to her own heart until the danger was over; kick, bite, punch and scratch for her—but she could only shout silently from the side-lines.

"It's best to leave her rest," the nurse said. "She'll be all right. I'll take care of her."

Rachel realized with a start that this was the nurse who had taken care of her grandfather. She looked older and her hair was grey, but it was the same person.

She brushed away her tears and squeezed Aunty Myfanwy's hand. Her aunt looked at her, and there was a touch of fear on her stubborn drawn face.

"You'll be all right," Rachel whispered. (Don't be afraid. I love you.)

"Come on, cariad," her father said. "Leave your aunt get some sleep."

* * * * *

It snowed for the next few days. Her father went back to work. And then one lunchtime he came home to announce: "The doctor says Aunty Myfanwy is 'rallying. She looks much better."

Rachel got her coat. "Can I take her some fruit, mum," she asked, pocketing some apples and tangerines.

"Diar annwyl", * her father laughed. "In such a hurry!"

Rachel took the short-cut down to Aunty Myfanwy's cottage. She ran down the steps into the dingle and followed the path along the river. When she was little, Aunty Myfanwy used to take her for walks here. There was a railway and there used to be trains—steam engines. She used to clutch her aunt's dress in fright if one came along hissing and puffing, whistle screaming. Her aunt taught her that rhyme:

> One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,
> All good children go to heaven,
> Penny on the railway,
> Tuppence on the sea,
> Thrupence on the roundabout,
> And God bless me!

"How much on the railway?" she asked.

"A penny," Rachel answered, watching the monstrous engine chug past them, the engine-driver shovelling coal into a fire.

"Cheapest and easiest then, isn't it?" her aunt said, laughing to herself.

Rachel crossed the bridge over the river, and walked along, watching the rapid water. When she arrived at the cottage, Aunty Myfanwy was sitting up in the living-room bed, asking for tea. Her hands trembled on the patchwork quilt.

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*Diar annwyl = dear, dear!

Rachel kissed her forehead, tucked a few wisps of white hair behind her ears, and put the kettle on the fire.

"I wish it was Spring," her aunt said. "Duw, I used to love flowers. I remember as if it were yesterday swinging high into the air and looking at a wall of sweet peas my father planted."

Rachel wished the garden was full of flowers and she could run out and gather a vaseful to put in the room.

"Duw, it was so nice in the old days," her aunt continued, "going for walks in the country with Owen, and your Nain and Taid. You never appreciate people until they've gone, do you?"

Something stung Rachel's heart as she poured out the tea.

"Well, I taught you to read Welsh," her aunt said. "D'you remember that?"

"You've still got a lot of correcting to do," Rachel said, glancing at her in alarm. Aunty Myfanwy's dark brooding eyes looked back at her.

"O, cariad bâch," she said.

Rachel's eyes filled with tears. She wanted to ask impossible questions. Who are we? What is it all about? (I love you—don't die.) And then the moment passed, and they sipped their tea.

Afraid to tire her aunt, Rachel left early.

"See you soon," she said, as she kissed her cheek and left the house.

* * * * *

They walked into the cemetery chapel. "Sorry," she heard people whisper to them. "Poor old lady!" "A second heart attack, isn't it? Duw!" "Our turn will soon come, won't it?" an old woman in a black shawl said. "Hush, Aunty Ceridwen, hush!" somebody said, escorting her back to her seat. "She was an old friend of mine," one of Aunty Myfanwy's neighbours said, "She had a heart of gold!" "Poor old lady!" "Sorry, Arthur," "So sorry!" "My aunty died," she heard Myfanwy explain to Merfyn. Rachel clutched her wet handkerchief.

"Rachel," she heard a familiar voice say. "I'm sorry. I know you were fond of your aunt."

She turned around and saw Thomas.

"I saw it in the paper," he said.

The pressure of people behind her pushed her forwards. She wanted to thank him, turned around again, and noticed him sit at the back of the chapel. Glancing at the other pews, she realized that Ann Griffith was not there. She followed Irene and Myfi into the first of the two pews reserved for the family. Her father, mother, and uncle got into the pew behind. She felt sorry as she looked around at them. Her father looked subdued and pale. Her mother's nose was red and she clutched her old blue rosary-beads. Her uncle stared down at his feet. They all looked smaller than she remembered them being before she left home.

Alf had phoned again and she had argued with her parents about leaving for London. "I'm eighteen," she said. "He's really nice! I'm staying with his family! I'm going anyway!" (I love him!)

There was a silence in the chapel. The organ struck a chord. The congregation began to sing,

"O! Iesu mawr, rho'd anian bur—"*

Their voices rose in harmony, passionate and sad, as if they were aware that they had lost not only a member of the community but their whole way of life. Rachel opened Aunty Myfanwy's Welsh hymn-book and saw the page blur. Myfi started to cry helplessly. Rachel held on to her and burst into tears. She wanted her aunt back. She wanted to argue with her again about the "modan world."

The dying chords of the hymn echoed through the chapel. (It's lost. It's lost. It's gone.) She could not stop crying.

"Brothers and sisters," the minister said. "We are here today—"

Through her sobs, Rachel heard: "She was honest—not afraid to speak her mind—generous. —She will be laid to rest beside the body of her late husband, Owen Morris Jones."

Rachel remembered his photograph. ("And this is Owen!" "Damn it, Myfanwy, I just don't care," fy nghariad.**)

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* Oh, Lord Jesus, we pray for your grace (to strengthen us in this wasteland for our journey to Canaan).

**my love.

"May the Lord bless Mrs. Myfanwy Jones, our sister; every member of her family; and all people here," the minister said. "Amen!"

IX

Rachel tried to see familiar fields and cottages through the rain running down the bus window. All her muscles were clenched against crying. She had to leave home unblessed. No argument could persuade her parents to trust her. Her father had raged; gone silent; and tried the lines that always worked:

"Can't you see you're making your poor mother sick? After all the trouble she's gone to for you this Christmas!"

Her mother looked pale enough.

"Of all the ingratitude!" her father shouted.

"You're wrong. I really appreciate—I really enjoyed—," Rachel said brokenly, then lost her temper. Did they expect her to grovel, to roll about on the front-door mat in remorse? They had destroyed one relationship already. They made it impossible for her to live with their attempts to break up everything outside their control.

"Good-bye!" Rachel said, zipping up her leather jacket and swinging the haversack on to her back. "And I hope you take proper care of your health, mum."

"Don't expect to come back with an attitude like that!" her father stormed. She noticed tears in his eyes as he turned round

and rushed up the stairs.

"I'm going with her to the station," Myfanwy said, running away, and coming back with her coat and fur mittens.

"Just you dare!" her mother seethed, showing amazing energy for a sick woman.

"Yes, I'm coming too," Irene said, less cool than she had been for years. Her face was slightly flushed and there were tension lines on her forehead as she came back in her blue raincoat and knotted a nylon scarf under her chin.

"I forbid you to go," her mother called out as they all left the house.

Rachel's last glimpse of home as she walked away was the sight of her mother weeping on the front door-step. Why was it necessary to hurt in order to make your own decisions? As she stared out of the bus window at the island, she tried not to cry for the sake of Myfanwy, who was sitting beside her, clutching her hand.

"You didn't really believe dad when he told you not to come back, did you?" asked Irene, who was sitting behind her. "Because I know he'll change his mind. It'll just take a little time, that's all. He's very fond of you, you know."

Rachel turned round and held Irene's arm. Her sisters both looked up at her. They were so young, and their eyes were shining with tears—and perhaps with hope. Suddenly she felt like a knight

who was going forth to clear a way for them, and smiled. They all linked and squeezed hands, and tears streamed down their faces, and they smiled as if they were sharing a secret.

"I'll write to you," Rachel said.

"We'll let you know how things are going on the home front," Irene said. "Won't we, Myfi? We'll work on them!"

"Yeah!" said Myfi, blowing her nose.

They were approaching the bridge. Rachel's muscles tightened again. She did not want to leave her sisters or her island. It was like being torn from Aunty Myfanwy all over again.

It was difficult to let go, especially since she could not see the future. She felt as if she were crossing from something she knew into a vacuum. When she saw people and fields and trees and life on the other side of the bridge, she sighed with relief, thought of Alf, and turned to her sisters again.

"I love you!" she said. "I'll write and let you know what happens."