

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

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I look back now with a kind of dread, yet dread is about the future, about what's going to happen, not what has already happened. So I dread ...? The memory of pain.

I never thought of myself as a man given to gestures. Imagination I do have, but I tend to keep it to myself.

I remember the road; the little road under the starlight that summer. It was the year Mam and Dad sold the farm. I didn't want it. They kept the farmhouse and the little *bwthyn* that had been the kernel of the homestead. You and I had used it for years already for holidays with the kids. They loved its thick walls and deep windowledges.

At *Clogwyn Uchel*, on the very edge of Wales, the roads are dark (some of them are tracks, really) and the stars sort of spread themselves out overhead, display themselves, with a careless glamour; or like something much more homely, like sugar spilt across a slate, but up there, up above. A sprinkling of sugar overhead. Very confusing if you thought about it too much. And higher into the sky – it's hard to describe! – there's a hazy cloud of them. Growing up at *Clogwyn Uchel* and I never bothered to learn much about them. Anyway, the stars do what they do whether we notice them or not. They're not waiting for our attention.

On a clear night like that one they shed enough light to see your way and the chalky ground of the lane helps. It's a glimmering path up to the *bwthyn*, reflecting light from far, far above. Sometimes it even seems to me as though a bit of the sky has dropped to earth because the little white stones are like a rough and tumble Milky Way between the hedges.

You walked ahead of me, Mari. Blindly, I thought. Or like someone who'd been dazzled by something. Your feet took you.

Your mind? Numbed.

Probably. We all have to do so much guess-work about each other! What is she feeling? What will she do next? What does she want?

'Do you love him?' I called out. But you didn't stop, or look back, or speak. I'm sure you heard me. You went on, into the little house.

I couldn't. I walked around it to where the sea suddenly presents itself. A shock! Always. Always that shiver at finding yourself on the edge of a cliff. Acres of water ahead in a dark mass. The endlessness of the sea. It doesn't stop. It goes about its business, rushing and crushing, floating boats, flexing itself. That night it was shuddering.

The stars. Some flung themselves down the sky. Mad bastards. Most looked on in a dignified way, blinking mildly at this recklessness. And I thought of the song. Its beautiful tune.

*Holl amrantau'r sêr ddywedant
Ar hyd y nos.*

Ar hyd y nos. All through the night.

Nothing like the crappy English version. Sickly-sweet, that. And boring. 'Soft the drowsy hours are creeping ... visions of delight revealing ... hill and vale in slumber steeping'. And the stars don't get a look-in! Not a mention. You pointed that out to me. When you were learning Welsh. 'How come ...?' you asked. You were always asking that. 'Why is the verb here? Why do I have to say ...?' Whatever.

And I'd say, 'It just is, Mari. I don't know why. Ask your teacher, *cariad*. Gwyn knows all that stuff.'

Yes, he did, didn't he? *Holl amrantau'r sêr ... amrantau* – such a great-sounding word for such a workaday bit of us; our eyelids. 'All the eyelids of the stars are saying'. Eyelids speak? Oh, yes. They shield or conceal. They widen to reveal.

Dyma'r ffordd i fro gogoniant.

'This is the way to the land of glory. All through the night.'

Go on, stars, I remember thinking that night, as I stood with them all above me, show us the way.

Oh, I closed my eyes then, I did. Because I was lost.

That stuff from the bible swam into my head:

Pan edrychwyf ar y nefoedd, gwaith dy fysedd...

'When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers ...' How does it go? 'The stars which thou hast ordained ... What is man, that thou art mindful of him? ... a little lower than the angels ... crowned with glory and honour ...'

Shit. Nothing like a chapel upbringing for loading you with stuff that makes you feel like shit in comparison. Sunday school set pieces. So beautiful the pictures in your head. No special effects needed. Just the words. You can see it happening: the stars being set in place one by one, like diamonds. And look at them up there, murmuring cheerfully to one another, 'Here we are! Just where we should be. But we'll cast ourselves from heaven in an instant. Give the word. No problem.'

But me? I was bloody lost. Lost.

We'd gone walking on the beach, earlier, you and me, between the pebbly border of the sea and the wrack and old bits of driftwood and plastic oddments that stack up high against the cliff. Between that stony fringe – it always hurt my feet as a child; I'd teeter across it, complaining, excited at my own bravery, me versus the chilly little waves; like someone walking over hot coals, I'd think, secretly proud (look at me, Mam! Dad!) – between those stones and the cliff there's a narrow crescent of smooth beige sand. It doesn't change. Same for our kids as it had been for me. You and I walked along it towards the setting sun but you wouldn't look at me and couldn't speak. Couldn't, I say, because you just shook your head sadly at every question.

We ended up just walking. I found myself scrutinising the sun's angle – how the low shafts of sun hit the beach – and how they struck stars out of the damp sand: tiny mica fragments that glinted ahead of every step I took. Walking on a constellation. Yes, I could think a thought like that even with all that was going on because that's the kind of mind I've got. I don't like misery. I sheer off it. Think of something else! Cheer up! It'll never happen.

But that night? Not a single bloody joke.

So later, when I stood out there in the darkness in front of the *bwthyn*, I looked up at the stars and I thought: we're surrounded; we haven't a chance. Stars above us. Stars below us. And we're stuck in the middle. The shit in the sandwich. Who'd want to stay here? Why would you stay?

And then, I knew you were behind me. I felt you. You were still inside, mind; behind me, looking out through the window of the dark house; looking out at the same pointlessly lovely display, the Plough

and all the other things we don't know the names of, you and me.

And I was desperate and I suppose it was so I wouldn't cry that I did it. I started to sing. Was I showing you I didn't care? Big man. Mad man to *sing* at a time like that!

*Golau arall yw tywyllwch,
I arddangos gwir brydferthwch,*

'Darkness is another type of light' – to show us true beauty, the beauty of 'the family of the heavens', the stars, 'in silence, all through the night'.

And I went on, louder; that tune rising, like a wave rolling up to its crest,

Nos yw henaint pan ddaw cystudd

'Night is old age'. That's 'when trouble hits us'; really hits us. Hits us when we're least able for it; gets us in an armlock and grinds us down, Mam and Dad.

And the tune sinks gradually, gradually, into calm and quiet, like a wave relaxing. Dark night is coming, it tells us; our youth is dead. I couldn't roll with the blows so well. I was getting the measure of myself a bit, frankly: a man in my middle years; nothing special.

Ond i harddu dyn a'i hwyreddydd

'But to make ourselves and our day's end beautiful ...' – to have something (at least something) to hold on to – 'let's put our fragile lights together ... All through the night'.

I couldn't help it. I couldn't, couldn't help it. I just cried.

I'd thought you'd always be there, see. *Ar hyd y nos*.

I stood out there and I cried. And I knew you were watching me. And I couldn't stop.

Pity, was it, that made you stay that night? The next morning the sky was like the inside of a sea shell, pearly pink and white. The stars had gone. We were still there.

Later, much later, you told me that when you'd looked out you'd thought, *My husband, singing in the darkness*. I had surprised you. You saw me silhouetted against the sky while a star dropped

gracefully across it, beyond me, and you thought: *Have I just watched the last moment of something that's millions of years old?* You saw, you told me – as though it were really there – the white heart of a November bonfire, the children's figures scampering, black, against it; bunches of sparks dancing up above the orange flames; and one particular spark, floating, higher and higher, wavering, till it expired, gently, and as silently as a shooting star.

And, there I was, one particular man. As though I'd come into focus again. And you chose. Because however hard things had become we had created a life together. Something real. Something real as a mad bastard singing on a cliff-top. You chose me. Just for tonight, you told me you remembered thinking: we'll see about tomorrow.

Our fragile lights. Together. We do what we can. Our lives are brief and *Hir yw'r nos*. Night is long.

And so, today, I've chosen: your name, with stars above and stars below. We walk on stars, with stars high overhead but life is in the middle, *pan ddaw cystudd, cariad*. A rough road, my love.

The mason's asked me why I have him carving stars on your stone. I'll tell him, but everyone else, as time goes by, will have to work it out for themselves.