

A NIGHT IN
ANNWN

THE STRANGE STORY OF WILLY JONES'S
NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE



OWEN JONES



A NIGHT IN ANNWN

The strange story of old Willy Jones's Near-Death Experience

by

Owen Jones

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(Untitled)

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1 WILLY JONES

“Dad, are you up yet?” shouted Becky into the dingy, unlit cottage as she closed the front door behind her with a bang in case he wasn’t even awake. She immediately wondered whether she should have left it open. The smell was terrible. “Dad, it’s me, Becky! Get up now, please, Dad!”

She drew the curtains on the lounge front window, which was quite large for an old Welsh country cottage, but it was still small by modern standards. She opened it as wide as it would go and locked it on the old-fashioned stays and then went into the back kitchen.

Part of the reason for the smell became obvious immediately. Kiddy, the old black Welsh sheepdog was cowering by the back door looking decidedly sheepish herself.

“Don’t worry about it, old girl, you couldn’t help it. He should have let you out hours ago”. She opened the back door in and spread the dog’s mess further across the lino floor. “Shit!” she said involuntarily as a new, even stronger wave of stench arose from the freshly disturbed and aerated pile of crap.

As soon as the gap was wide enough, Kiddy gratefully slipped out into the garden, happy to be away from the source of her embarrassment.

Becky took a bucket and stinking floor cloth from under the sink, but had to empty the dishes onto the worktop before she could fill the bucket in the sink to clean the floor. In the absence of hot water and proprietary cleaning products, she used cold water and soap powder

There were no rubber gloves either, so she couped down and began to clean up after the dog.

“Shit, shit, shit and more shit!” she muttered to herself. “This house is one big shithole!” As she moved around the two-foot long brown streak, the soles of her daps stuck to the floor. The whole kitchen needed power-washing with boiling water, she thought.

When she was satisfied with that small patch, Becky went into the garden and the outside toilet and poured the water away. Then she washed her hands and the bucket out under the outside tap; poured bleach from the toilet into it and refilled it with water, leaving the floor cloth to soak and hopefully clean itself.

She re-entered the kitchen, put the plug in the sink, turned on the only tap, opened the window and put the dishes in the water to soak as well. The only cooking utensil that had been used since she had last been there was the frying

pan, but all the dishes were dirty and so were a lot of cups, whisky and beer glasses.

She knew what that meant. A fry-up and tea in the morning, late morning or early afternoon; a fry-up and beer in the evening and a few whiskies before bed. The situation was becoming impossible and Becky was rapidly losing patience with her father, although she did feel sorry for his poor old dog for having to live in a pigsty like this with her father, who didn't seem to mind the smell and degradation.

As she was washing the dishes, she looked out on to the short mountain range which rose a few miles beyond what was now euphemistically called a garden, but which had been beautiful when she had lived at home. The mountains had always held a pulling fascination for her; she took after her mother in that regard. Her mother had done the dishes two or three times a day at that window and stared at those mountains for forty-two years.

She and her father liked to think that she was happy playing in or wandering around them now that she was no longer with them. She had died of cancer of the cervix five years before. It had been a complete surprise, because she had never attended the check-ups organised in the hospital. Diagnosed and dead within three months; it had been a terrible shock.

However, these days, Becky knew more about the disease, and had had tests herself, and suspected that her hard-working, stoical mother had known that she had a problem, but she hadn't wanted to be a burden and perhaps quite liked the idea of being dead and away from the drudgery of a small, isolated, lonely, mountain farm.

"I was going to do them as soon as I came down!"

"Oh! You gave me a shock! I do wish you wouldn't creep up behind me like that. I've told you about it before, haven't I, Dad?"

"That's a nice way to greet your old Da, I'm sure. Anyway, I wasn't creeping about and even if I were, I am allowed to in my own house".

"How are you feeling today, Da?" She sometimes lapsed into the old vernacular and called him 'Da' and sometimes they even spoke Welsh, but not so often since Becky had come back from horticultural college and her mother had died.

"I'm all right. I just get so tired and I can't see the point of getting up early when it's cold. Why not wait for the sun to warm the place up a bit first and stay in bed? Is there any tea? I'm parched. My mouth tastes like a labourer's jockstrap".

"Do you have to be so disgustingly graphic? I haven't got two pairs of hands, you know! I had to clean up after poor old Kiddy because you were too 'tired' to let her out, and this place was too filthy to eat anything out of.

"And you really ought to take more care of yourself", she said turning and looking him up and down. "You look a complete mess".

William Jones was standing before her in his pyjama bottoms without any slippers. His half a head of white hair was sticking up at all angles and the muscles in his face looked as if they were still asleep. A whiff of his breath as he spoke revealed that she had been right about the whisky nightcaps – probably enough for a full headdress.

“Why don’t you brush your teeth and swill some water over your face to wake yourself up?”

“I don’t need any lectures on personal hygiene from you, thank you very much. I have my own routines, established over sixty years and they have always been good enough. I won’t be changing them now, not for you nor anyone else. Your dear old mother never complained and her standards are good enough for me.

“Anyway, if you must know the ins and outs of a cat’s arse, I was just on my way to use the lavvy. So, if you’ll excuse me...”

He went outside. He had always washed under the outside tap unless there was snow or ice on the ground, and a shower or a bath were still once-a-week, special occasions.

She dried her hands on a tea towel, filled the kettle, lit the gas under it, dropped three teabags into the teapot, after checking that it was empty, and went back to the dishes.

“Go and put some clothes on, Da”, she prompted him when he came back in and reached for the towel hanging on a hook behind the back door. “I’ll make us some toast and the tea will be brewed by then. Go on now, and don’t take too long about it”.

She warmed the pot, put the teabags in and poured the water onto them, then she pulled the plug from the sink and lit the grill. She had brought her own food as she usually did, because William rarely made it to the shops, and the inside of his fridge was an offence against decency. She would have to tackle it later, but she wanted to have had her breakfast first.

As the grill was warming up, she remembered the dog, and put the scraps she had brought into her bowl. There would probably be a half-opened, half-used, dried-up tin of dog food in the fridge, but that would have to wait and Kiddy deserved a treat from time to time.

Just before she heard her father starting to come downstairs, she shook the tablecloth outside the front door, replaced it with a new one and laid the breakfast out.

“See, you can look nice when you want to, Da”.

“No-one’s going to see me, so what does it matter? You didn’t put any beer with that melted cheese”.

“No, you get through enough beer during the day without having to have it for breakfast as well”.

“Beer in cheese is not like drinking beer, it’s traditional. Welsh Rarebit, that is. It’s a centuries-old Welsh custom, but you likes your melted cheese the

English way, without beer”.

“One day, you will just be grateful, and the shock will be so much that I’ll keel over and go to join Mum on the mountains out the back. Parents complain that children are ungrateful, but old people, or you anyway, are much worse”.

“I’m sorry, Becky” he said looking up at her. “I do appreciate everything you do for me, really I do... It’s just that old people become set in their ways. My mother, may God rest her Soul, always put beer in the melted cheese for my old Dad, and your mother always did it for me. After sixty years of cheese and beer on toast, you becomes set in your ways. You can see that, can’t you?”

“Yes, Da, now will you please shut up about the bloody beer!”

“Ooh! Language, Becky! Your mother would not abide foul language in the house and nether will I in her honour! That’s another nasty habit you picked up in that English college”.

“No, it isn’t! I get that from you”.

William wasn’t sure whether that was true or not, but decided not to argue. “It’s a lovely drop of tea, and the cheese is a nice change, if we only ‘as it like this once in a while”, he said.

“The truth is, I knew there was probably beer in the fridge, but I couldn’t bring myself to go in there until after I had eaten”.

Her father laughed. “Now that I can understand! I don’t like going in there myself... especially if it’s dark. You don’t know what might be lurking in there. Something might bite your hand off!” and he made a grab for one of her hands.

She pulled it back in time joining in the fun.

“Why do you live like this, Da? There’s no need for it, is there? You talk about tradition, but Mum used to keep this house spotless. It was her pride and joy, but I bet she’d be too ashamed to set foot in it now”.

“Well, that’s where you are wrong, Miss Smarty-Pants with your English college education. I often sit and talk to your mother within these walls”.

“I know, Dad, but I bet she’s often shaking her head at the state you allow the place to get into. It stank like a cesspit this morning... beer, whisky, dog’s mess and old rotting food. It nearly made me sick!”

“I’m sorry, I do know that I let the place go too far sometimes. There is just no incentive any longer though. I try sometimes, I really do. The will power is just not there anymore, I suppose”.

“Why don’t you come and stay with us? We would love to have you and we have asked you many times. This place is too big for one man alone, especially one like you who has never had to run a household for himself. You’re not up to it, Dad, what with your rheumatism, your bad back, and swollen feet”.

“You make me sound fit for the knackers yard. Look, I know you have, you have all been very kind, but I cannot leave this house. There are too many people and memories here for me and old Kiddy. Anyways, if we moved out, your mother would be here all alone”.

“I know you believe that, Dad, but I think that if there are ghosts, and I don’t see why there shouldn’t be, then they can go where they like. They won’t be tied to one location”.

“Well, I am not so sure. You often hear of a spot or house being haunted, don’t you? Now I’m not one for emotive language like haunting and such like, but I think that ghosts, like people, become attached to one place and stay there”.

“But why would they become attached? It doesn’t make any sense”.

“Yes, it does when you think about it. We with a body become attached to friends, family and our property. If I died tomorrow, it doesn’t mean that you would go and live in Zimbabwe, does it? If a meteor came crashing down on this old farm, I wouldn’t up sticks and move to Scotland, would I?

“No, of course not. I am emotionally attached to this place. I stay here and if I have to go away for a while, I come back. So do ninety percent of other people. It’s only the weird expats who move away for a long time and most of them die at home too. You take it from me that ghosts, or people without bodies, do things for the same reasons as those with bodies”.

“Have you actually seen Mum and spoken to her face to face?”

“That’s a very difficult question to answer, my dear. I was talking to you this morning, but you had your back to me and couldn’t see me. However, that didn’t prevent you from knowing that it was me behind you, did it? In answer to your question though, I have never seen her as I am looking at you now, or had a conversation like this. I think that I have caught glimpses of her though, like when the telly’s on the blink and I hear her voice in my head”.

“You see Mum on the TV? I’ve seen that in films, but I’ve never heard of it happening in real life. Are you sure?”

“No, I didn’t mean that at all! I might see an image of her in a window, the steam of the kettle or in the shadows of the house. I have a theory about that. Your mother hasn’t learned how to project herself yet, and I don’t know what I’m looking for. Do you understand?”

“I’m not sure. When you’re dead you’re dead, aren’t you?”

“People assume so, but none of us really knows, do we? Or I’ll rephrase that... nobody can prove that they know. There is a man who insists that he is God’s right hand man on the planet, but God hasn’t helped him prove it. Yet, it is blasted out to the world from Catholic media as if it is undisputed gospel. How can he or they get away with that in this day and age?”

“If there is reincarnation, we have been dead before, so what is there to learn?”

“By the same token, if there is reincarnation, we have been born before, but we still have to relearn how to walk and talk and behave. Perhaps, dead people have to relearn how to make their bodies brighter or denser so that we can see them. Same with their voices”.

“So why don’t lots of people see lots of ghosts all the time?”

“I think that they do, but we don’t hear about it. The Christian Church is very strong and supports the state in most cases, so the state supports it. They

prop each other up and the establishment figures who own the press and the media have a large stake in society as it is, so they all stick up for one another. I'm sure that there are tens of millions of Indians who see and talk to ghosts every day. I bet there are millions doing it every day in every country, but they would rather tell you about some jihad or that the pope kissed some tarmac. It's a conspiracy and one that has been going on for centuries or more like when they started persecuting witches”.

“Do you really think so, Dad? It sounds a bit far fetched, doesn't it?”

“That is exactly what they want you to think! If they can destroy your argument by ridiculing you, not necessarily your argument itself, then they have an easy victory. I do now, yes, but I've only just come to this conclusion. I have a lot of time to think these days, now that your mother isn't trying to get me to paint the door or repair the roof every time it looks as if I might be taking ten minutes rest”.

“Mum wasn't like that!”

“She bloody well was, you know, but she's not now. She had a very hard life, and neither of us helped her as much as we could have, so she made me work hard too. Look, I'm not saying that she was wrong to do what she did. It made all our lives better, but she did do it and sometimes, I went to the pub rather than sit here and get nagged just because I was taking a few hours off. She could not bear to see someone not working. That was old school... it was normal back then. I'm not complaining. I had a few afternoons in the pub, and that was enough, and a darn sight more than she ever had”.

“Talking about work, I'd better crack on. I'll wash the lino in the kitchen and clean out the fridge, but I'll have to go home then and start on my own house. Why don't you bring a chair to the kitchen door so we can have a chat?”

“Aye, all right. I can't get down on the floor to clean it any more, or I wouldn't get back up”.

“You've never cleaned a floor in your life, but if you wanted to, you would buy a mop or a Squeegee. In fact, I'm going to get you one for Christmas for saying that!”

“You know me too well, that's your trouble. Anyways, we had a strict division of labour, your mother and me. I worked the farm and she ran the house”.

“Yes, except that she had to run the vegetable and the herb gardens too”.

“Naturally, that was always a part of the house. It was where the wise old women, the witches I was talking about earlier, used to grow their herbs to keep the family strong and healthy. That was not male chauvinism, they wanted and needed that herb patch. So, learn your facts before you go criticising what you don't know nothing about”.

“OK, OK, I give up. There, that's the floor done, and it would take half the time with a decent mop. Now for the fridge”. She looked at her father, crossed herself and opened the door.

“I'm going in”, she said. “Jeez, it's Hell in here!”

“Don’t exaggerate”, he laughed. “Pass me a beer, leave the rest there and throw everything else out, if you like”, which was what she did.

“OK, I really do have to go now. I’ll be back tomorrow morning to change the bed and do the lounge. What are you doing this afternoon, can I drop you anywhere?”

“I’ll have to think about that... Now then, what have I got on my social calendar for this fine summer’s day. Oh, dear, I seem to have mislaid it. What on Earth am I going to do now? I can’t remember a single appointment. In that case, I’ll just have to rely on the old standby, and walk Kiddy around the hilltop until we are both hungry enough to eat again and come home again to tell Mam all about our walk - how many rabbits we saw, how many snakes, and how many people, which is usually none.

“It’s either that or get you to drop us at the village pub and hope that someone will drop us home. Decisions, decisions! It’s all go, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, but I have to go, and that is certain. Do you want me to pick up your pension tomorrow, Dad, and food and beer?”

“Yes, please, darling. We’ll just go for a walk today. Perhaps we’ll go to the pub tomorrow. Thanks for all you’ve done. Let me walk you to your car. Give my love to all your family, won’t you? Now, where’s that dog of mine?”

“Kiddy! Kiddy! Dewch yma - Come here.” she heard him calling as she drove slowly away, watching him and his faithful dog in the rear-view mirror. She wondered how much longer he would be able to cope on his own miles from anywhere as he was.

When Becky had driven off, William went back into the house, locked the back door and took his stick from the corner where it rested and a lightweight jacket from the hook on the front door.

“Bye-bye, my lovely Sarah. I won’t be long”, he whispered, and locked that behind him too

He didn’t need a lead for his dog because she had been a working sheep dog all her life and was always at William’s beck and call. They loved each other as much as any two different species can and set off on one of their daily routes which would have taken them near most of their sheep five years before, but now only led to empty grassland. He checked the sky again out of habit, but concluded that it would be a lovely day for the third time that morning.

2 WILLY’S WALK

William bent over despite a twinge of back pain to inspect the soil. There had been a little rain the day before and he didn’t want to have to cope with wet

grass or slippery mud. It was still soft to the touch, so he chose to walk along the road that day and head upwards towards the summit of the hill that they lived on. His was not the only farm on this hill, but there was none higher than his, so from here on up, he considered it to be 'Jones Peak', although only by default, not by law.

His family had lived in that farm for at least eight generations according to the family Bible, the earliest date in which was 1742. All Joneses and all shepherds. The only change that had taken place in thousands of years was the road, which the government had paid for during the early years of the Second World War so that they could drive a spotter team to the summit to look out for sneaky incoming German planes.

It had been a complete waste of time and money and seemed symbolic of the whole war itself. The only people who had benefitted from the road were his own family, although at the time, his grandfather and grandmother had not wanted it there in case it encouraged tourists and other unwelcome outsiders. They need not have worried. William rarely encountered more than one or two cars a month and they were always owned by villagers wanting to take their dogs for a walk or their family for a picnic.

He and his wife, Sarah, had done that with their Becky when she was still in school too. They had tried to find the time for an outing, for that was their euphemism for it, at least once a month. He had never owned a car though, so a lot depended on the weather which was as unpredictable as the sea.

The mountains formed an efficient windbreak against the worst of the Atlantic weather, but the wind, mist and drizzle that got over them landed on Jones' Peak, from where they would descend down the hill to envelope the village, which he would be able to see in thirty minutes as they rounded that side on their corkscrew journey upwards.

He checked his bearing and stood up straight. He had been finding recently that he had a tendency to stoop if he didn't keep take care. He didn't want that. He used a staff, but he always had done, ever since he was a boy. You could not be a proper shepherd or even an amateur hill walker without a decent staff. In the old days, he had used it to frighten off the occasional snake and tap a dawdling sheep, but he had never used it to help him walk, not like he did these days.

He watched Kiddy race on ahead on the other side of the road – the safer side, away from the edge. She didn't care for the view down like he did and preferred the soft grass beneath her pads. She had caught the smell of something and was looking for its source behind the rocks and boulders that lay scattered about. She was twelve years old, and so was technically older than he was by nearly twenty years, but she could still manage a turn of speed. A short burst when the excitement of the chase took her. This would probably be a rabbit or a hare, but she would chase off snakes too.

It was a darn sight more than he could do these days, he thought sadly. He couldn't even chase a pretty girl nowadays, but worse still, he wouldn't even want to.. Where had all his energy gone? He had been able to run up and down this hill as much as he had wanted to for decades and now he was having trouble walking up the last section with a straight back and a stick.

It was at times like these, when he was alone, which was most of the time now, that he wondered what the point of it all was.

In a hundred yards, he would come to the boulder where he had first kissed Sarah, and where two years later she had accepted his proposal of marriage and made him the happiest man alive. He had never told anyone about that rock, because he was sure that his father would have told him that it had not always been there; that the army bulldozer had pushed all the rocks to the inside of the road rather than carry them down.

He would have said something to spoil the memory and the dream that that smooth rock had been there for ever, or at least since the Ice Age, which was long enough ago for him to still think of as romantic. He had never witnessed one tender moment between his grandparents, on either side, or his own parents. They had been tough, hard, no-nonsense people, suited to their times, whereas he had had the relative luxury of growing up in the post-war years when there was hope and prosperity. Not that it had affected or even reached their little hill, but it was evident in the media that a New World had dawned.

"About bloody time!" he remembered his father saying one day. "I hope it's a bloody sight better than the old one!" His mother had scolded him for bad language and he had taken his pipe out into the back garden 'for a bit of peace'.

He reached the boulder gratefully and sat down. Kiddy put her paws to the surface beside him, stared at him with her still-bright eyes, surrounded by white-grey hair and panted. William was almost panting too, but he stroked her hair, as he had Sarah's all those years ago, and she was just as happy as his then future wife had been.

"There's a good girl. You're a good girl you are. A good girl!" and Kiddy appeared to show satisfaction with the praise by licking his forearm. He gazed out across the narrow road and wide valley before him. "My Mam and Da used to tell me that witches, fairies and pixies live in these hills and valleys... and my grandparents did! And I believed them..." he said to his dog. "Until I became all grown up and educated.

"I didn't want to seem like a stupid farm boy then... I was a New Man in a New World and the Old World was for silly old people. Aye, and so were the witches and The Fair Family - Y Tylwyth Teg. But, it's funny, you know, Kiddy, my girl, the older I got the more them old stories made sense to me... and now? I fair believes 'em again.

"Are you with the Fair People, my lovely Sarah or are you back in the cottage. I would like to think that you're sitting by me on our love seat of stone now..."

Tears did not come, but he thought that they would have in 'normal' people. 'Too much of my Da in me to cry in public!' he said aloud, but only because there was no other human being for miles around.

"I'm a silly old bugger, that's what I am, aren't I, Kiddy? A stupid, silly old bugger... Come on, let's get on with it".

He slid off the rock to his feet and the dog put her front paws on his thigh, looking for another pat and thrashing her tail because she could feel her master's mood lightening. They set off and he checked his posture again.

Thirty-odd minutes later, they were walking across the patch of concrete on the summit of Jones' Peak, or Bryn Teg – Fair Hill – to give it its real name. His goal was the bench in the corner of the concrete slab. In his earliest memories of the hilltop, the small shed where the army lookouts could get out of bad weather had still been there and when it had fallen into disuse, courting couples had taken it over.

After years of complaints from parents, and more than a few shotgun weddings, the council had taken it down. It still made him smile to remember a letter some wag had sent in to the readers' opinion column. He had likened the shed to a pimple on the bald spot of a middle-aged man's head. Well, the pimple had disappeared now and to mark its historical role was this park bench. If you sat on it with your back to the mountains, you felt as if you were sitting on top of the world and could see for miles.

As for the courting couples, they still went there but they all had cars these days, and contraception, or most of them anyway.

It was a lovely day. There was the inevitable breeze, but it was as weak as it got. It made his hair fly about, but it was exhilarating and made him feel glad to be alive again, although he knew that the effect was only temporary. As soon as they left that magical spot, he would wonder what it was all about again. He had known when he had had a family, but he couldn't remember any longer.

"Come on, my lovely girl, let's be heading back down". It was a signal to her for a treat before starting for home. William usually took an apple or a bar of chocolate with him for energy for the homeward journey and he always gave his dog a biscuit as well. She came over to him wagging her tail in expectation.

"Good girl, Kiddy", he soothed stroking her head with one hand while she ate the biscuits out of the other. "That's the lot, off we go".

As William was getting up, a car appeared on the concrete and it flashed its lights. A man of William's age got out and so did a young girl.

"Hello, Bill. The number of times I come up yer and don't see anyone. Anyway, I'm glad I've bumped into you actually. It's my birthday today and I'm having a little do in the village pub. I'm just showing my granddaughter the magnificent view from our hill, then I'll take her home and go on down. Do you fancy it?"

"I don't know, Dai. Happy Birthday by the way". He waved at the girl who remained the other side of the car stroking the dog.

“Come on, I’ll take you and your dog down in the car. Better than watching daytime TV, surely?”

“It is that without a doubt. Yes, go on then. My daughter asked me if I wanted to go down this morning. I said ‘No, I’ll leave it till tomorrow’, but this is a good reason to change my mind. You’re on!”

“Good man! Good man! If you’d been on the phone I would have rung you to give you an invite, but you won’t have one will you?”

“No fear! Bloody waste of money up yer, man... nothing works. No signal, no bloody electric half the time neither”.

“No, the world that time forgot, that’s where you live. It’s like going back a hundred years up yer... maybe two hundred...”

“If it wasn’t for this concrete slab, nothing has changed for thousands of years, Dai, thousands and thousands”.

When Dai had shown his granddaughter around the hilltop, he promised her an ice cream and they all got into the car to start their descent.

That old dog of yours pongs a bit, doesn’t she, Bill? Don’t you think it’s time she had a bath?”

“No, I do not! She is a farm working girl, not some floozy. She wants to smell like a dog so other dogs will find her attractive, not like some city girl. You won’t find another dog readier to jump into a stream than old Kiddy, but I ain’t putting no powders and perfumes on her so’s people thinks she smells nice. I don’t believe in poncifying dogs.

“She’s a dog, and if you wants a dog, you ‘as to accept that dogs don’t smell like us”.

Dai looked at his friend and agreed, but wondered whether his friend didn’t need a little ‘poncifying’ himself.

Dai drove past a shop near the village, bought his granddaughter an ice cream and took her home, then they walked a little further on down the hill to the ‘Bryn Teg’, the village public house. It was nearly four o’ clock.

William entered the pub first, but turned to hold the door open for his friend without looking inside. As Dai walked through the door, the sound of ‘Happy Birthday’ erupted. They both looked around the bar in amazement at the decorations and trimmings. The landlord and landlady, Harry and Joyce, led the birthday song accompanied by ten or twelve men and women, all of about retirement age.

“Well I never!” he said to everyone as he and William took stools at the bar and Kiddy lay down in her usual spot under a table by the door.

“Pint of bitter, Dai?” asked Harry.

“Yes, please, Harry. Who did all this?”

“It was Joyce’s idea, but a few of your friends here helped us decorate the place. Bitter for you too, Bill?”

“Aye, thanks, Harry. I’ll get these”.

“Happy Birthday, mate!” he said clinking glasses with his friend when their pints had arrived, “and many more of them”.

“Thanks, Bill. All the best, mate. I’m glad you could come. I wasn’t expecting all this though and that’s for sure. Thanks for all the trouble you’ve gone to for my birthday, everyone”, he said standing up and raising his glass to everyone. “I don’t think I’ve had a birthday party since the kids left home. It was a very kind thought. Thank you, Joyce”.

When the initial excitement caused by Dai’s entrance had died down, most of the men went back to watching a rerun of a recent football game, while others exchanged anecdotes about village life and hill farming in general.

“Fancy a game of Crib, Dai?”

“Sure. Usual stakes?”

“Aye, penny a point. Harry, the cards, please”.

Harry nodded and reached for the set. He knew what they were talking about because they had been playing Crib together for all of the nineteen years he had been the landlord of the Bryn Teg, and he had been told that they had been playing it for just as long before he had taken over.

“Shall I give Kiddy her usual as well?” asked Harry.

William looked over his shoulder to see his dog panting back at him, her tail wagging as usual whenever he paid her attention.

“Yes, please, Harry. It’s her wages for having to wait for me, and she’s come to expect them now”.

“How long has she been coming here? Ten years?”

“Twelve, but she wasn’t what you would call a regular until I sold the flock five years ago”.

“Twelve years, is it? Doesn’t time fly?” he said pouring a half a bitter into the bowl that William left behind the bar for her, and topping it up with water. He put that and a packet of Smokey-Bacon flavoured crisps on the bar and walked around the counter.

“There you are, old girl”, he said putting the bowl on yesterday’s newspaper and emptying the crisps onto it. Kiddy waited patiently, her tail wagging and her tongue hanging out. The moment that Harry had finished patting her head, she tucked into her treat.

“I love to do that for her. I actually look forward to it”, said the kind-hearted landlord.

The afternoon passed quickly, and after several games, most of which Dai won for a change, William made ready to go.

“Not going already are you, Bill?”

“Aye, I’ve had my three pints and two hours and you’ve had my money - birthday boy’s luck, so it’s time to hit the road”.

“Aw, come on, I’m enjoying winning for a change. I’ll tell you what, stay another hour and not only will I buy you a pint, but I’ll give you double stakes”.

“Oh, I don’t know”, he said but he was considering the proposition. His friend had not had to buy a drink all afternoon and he had ninety-eight pence of William’s money.

“All right, but I got to take the dog outside for a Gypsy’s first. Her bladder’s not as strong as it used to be”.

“You could say that about all of us”, replied Dai. “You do that and I’ll nip to the gents’ as well”.

Kiddy couped down in the car park and looked away from William shyly as she always did when going about her business and then started to walk home. William whistled and held the door open for her. She hurried inside and they both resumed their places.

“I needed that”, said Dai holding the deck of cards out for William to cut them, “and it looked as if she did too”.

“She thought she was going home for her dinner, so I’ll only stay another hour. Cheers, Dai. Thanks for the pint”.

“My pleasure”, he replied.

“I’ll get my money back out of you now”.

“Never! I’m going to whip your arse. I’m on a roll, I can feel it”.

Ninety minutes and two pints later, William got up to go again, and Dai didn’t try to stop him.

“A quick visit to the bog, and then we’re off. I won’t get home until eight o’clock now. I’m not as fleet of foot as I used to be you know. Oh, and a packet of peanuts, Harry, please”.

“None of us are, mate. Thanks for the lesson in Crib, but I nearly had you this time. You’re a jammy sod, you get some incredible luck, you do!”

“That’s skill, my boy! I’ve been trying to teach you the game for forty years. Don’t you think it’s time you packed it in and tried snooker instead?”

“I’ll have you next time”.

“In your dreams. Enjoy the rest of your birthday. Bye everyone, time to get up that hill and home”. He looked around the room, but already knew that no-one could give him a lift even part the way home. When he opened the door, Kiddy was in front of him.

Kiddy usually led the way out of the village, and he would follow on two and a half yards behind her. He had never been sure why she liked to walk like that, but he suspected that she was trying to force the pace. When they got onto the hill road, she wandered more freely ahead, behind and to the right of him.

Five pints was more than William was accustomed to these days and it made him sing to himself quietly as he tried not to trudge up the hill. He liked to sing the hymns that he had learned in school and chapel. He didn’t know a single modern song, except for some Max Boyce that they sang in the pub during a rugby international, and he was proud of it. Most of the hymns he could sing in Welsh and English, but preferred the Welsh versions.

Forty minutes later, William was approaching a corner which would reveal another rock that they always rested at on the downhill side of his house. He felt his jacket pocket for the packet of peanuts he would share with Kiddy before they tackled the last short leg home. It was more of a treat to stop there than a necessity. They both enjoyed their breaks, their snacks and taking their time in their new lives of retirement. As he rounded the corner, he was wondering where Kiddy had got to. It wasn't like her not to check up on him every few minutes.

Then he saw her. She was lying on the ground just before the rock. It immediately struck him as strange that she wasn't sitting in her usual place on the right-hand side of it.

He hurried his pace. Fifty yards from her, she gave a kick, arched her back and was still. He started to run and called her name, but she made no attempt to respond.

He dropped to his knees hurting them on the hard surface, but the tears were not because of that. He could see that his friend had suffered a heart attack and not survived it.

William drew her up onto his lap and wept like a child. Some thirty or forty minutes later, he scooped her up with his right hand and tried to stand up, but he could not. His knees were too weak, so he crawled to their rock and used his left hand to help him up. He sat on the rock with his dog on his lap and the tears started again. 'She hadn't even had her peanuts!' he was thinking as a pain grew in his left arm. The iron grip of a vice squeezed his chest and he was groaning as he and Kiddy slipped off the rock onto the sparse grass below it.

3 SARAH

"Where am I?" asked William of the people standing around him. "Am I in hospital?"

"Yes, you can call it that. You are very sick, but you have recovered a great deal since we found you, so there is every reason to believe that you will make a total recovery".

"Thank you, doctor. My mind is a little foggy. I think I must have a hangover. I had a little more than usual to drink... It was a friend's birthday..."

"Yes, we know, but don't worry about anything like that now you need rest more than anything".

"Kiddy, my dog, died, didn't she?"

"Don't worry about her either. She is in good hands. We are taking good care of her too. You will be able to see her again shortly".

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