

At the Fresher's Dance

We heard the band start up in earnest, loudly. God knows what the decibel level was like in the hall, but we were all prepared to risk our eardrums regardless. Just inside the hall, Suzie stood out head and shoulders above her companions, the same girls as yesterday. Several students were already gyrating on the dance floor.

Rud nudged me, "Split them up?"

I nodded.

Rud made a bee-line for Linda. Whatever his chat-line was, it worked, and he'd separated her from the pack as efficiently as a sheep-dog cutting out one of the flock. The rest of us huddled in a group, not talking, for the electric noise booming out of the speakers made conversation impossible. Gradually we eased into pairs, Suzie with Dan, Jake with Sunny, and myself very happy to get closer to Bronwen.

The group were obviously influenced by the Rolling Stones, and covered two of their numbers in the first four offerings. Their overweight lead singer strutted and pranced around the stage, more like a boulder than a Stone and distinctly unsexy in his posing.

Bronwen and I rolled our eyes at the opening bars of *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*.

"Here we go again!" I mouthed.

While Mick Jagger might have got away safely with the energetic gyrations, the unsecured boards weren't up to the pounding they were suffering, and the front plank tilted over the edge of the bales, tipping the singer heavily into the arms of a hairy hulk showing off some novel footwork to his waif-like companion. The bass player and guitarist, facing the drummer in a frenzied riff, remained blissfully unaware of their partner's misfortune until the drummer's eyes returned from contemplating his navel and he brought the music to a crashing halt.

"What the f...?" came loud and clear. Fatty Jagger and Hairy Hunk extricated themselves up from the tangle in which they had fallen, and squared up to each other, mouthing obscenities, neither getting satisfaction of any kind. A couple of stewards rushed over, with the unenviable task of calming things down and getting, hopefully, the show on the road again.

"Shall we take a break?" I asked Bronwen. "Coffee or alcohol?"

Sandra

My eyes popped as my jaw dropped. "Sandra, I don't think ... I can't ..." And I turned and rushed downstairs, grabbed my parka and rucksack and opened the front door. I'm no prude, and certainly not averse to dalliance, but it didn't feel right to be seduced by a mother of one of my pupils. God knows what kinds of sanctions could be imposed to the detriment of my teaching career if it became known that I was shagging a school governor! What if she claimed I tried to rape her? I might just as well have been hung for a sheep as a lamb! These and other emotional and probably irrational thoughts sped through my brain in the few seconds it took me to leave Sandra's cottage.

The cold realisation of my actions hit me with the driving rain and bitter wind. Not least of which was that instead of a warm bed with or without Sandra (we could have probably agreed an honourable compromise) I was now stuck outdoors on a winter night with nowhere to go. I turned and knocked on the door. I thought I could hear crying.

"Sandra! I'm sorry! Please let me in again!"

"Go away, you bastard!"

That sounded pretty uncompromising. Upper curtains from the neighbouring house were beginning to twitch. 'You stupid, stupid bugger, Kiddecott!' I thought, 'What price your principles?'

In the warmth of the cottage, the evening had passed quickly, and a glance at my watch showed it was just past 11 o'clock. I wandered dejectedly down the street past The Drovers, which had already closed its doors, even if by any remote chance they would have done bed and breakfast at such short notice.

I remembered that I had the school key in my rucksack. Well, at least I could get out of the cold, and kip down in the staff room till morning.

Eisteddfod

A Mini screeched to a halt in front of us, and a bespectacled, bearded and balding driver yelled out, "Are you the two I'm supposed to be putting up for the night at my place?"

We didn't wait to consider whether anyone else was likely to be sleep walking the street.

"That's us!" called Jake, trailing his sleeping bag down the stone steps of the Union.

There were already two other bodies apart from the driver, which made for unavoidable intimacy.

"Beats me how some people manage to have sex in a Mini," observed Jake.

'My place' was a reasonably-sized study bedroom with en-suite facilities in Ty Coch Student Residence, though I guessed the driver was a cut above your average student to warrant such luxury. Unless, of course, Aberystwyth was more generous to its students. It certainly seemed more liberal than Tencastle in its attitude to mixed-sex accommodation, for I'd heard several female voices in the corridor.

Three sleeping bags, as yet unoccupied were already spread out on the floor. and there was just about room for ours as well. The driver had disappeared and Jake was taking a shower while I was temporarily exposed between drying off and dressing for bed.

A knock came on the door, and, before I could reply, a girl in a flimsy nightdress entered.

"Adieu kerrima?" I think that's what she said.

A recently discarded sock was closest to hand as I tried to show some modesty. "Er ... je non parlez ne ... um ... non suis Gauloise," I stuttered. Languages were never my strong point.

"Oh, you're English! Sorry, I was wanting Ceri."

Christ, but she was pretty, and nothing to hide!

"Will I do?" I said hopefully, and I realised that is wasn't only my hopes that were rising.

She briefly lowered her eyes and grinned, "Another time perhaps." And then with a flash of pearly white teeth she was gone.

"What's this, the latest fashion – knitted condoms?" said Jake as he emerged from the shower.

My sock slid listlessly to the floor.

Fuel

It was evident Jake wasn't planning on attending Sunday service. Not that any of us had a clue where the nearest church was anyway, even if we'd felt inclined to worship.

"Going to a tramps' ball?" I didn't know Jake even possessed such ragged old jeans and jacket.

"No, he's got a weekend job as a scarecrow," said Dan.

"Very funny. I'll need your help."

"What, to collect a penny for the guy?" Dan chortled.

"Foraging, you pillocks!"

"Come again?"

"Over in the wood, you know, gathering firewood."

"Now hang on, Jake, I'm not sure..."

"S'all right, you and Dan can stay safe on this side, I'll do the dirty work."

"But..."

"Come on, we can't afford to buy wood as well as coal and still eat! See you by the stream in five minutes."

Benji suddenly discovered he had more urgent things to attend to.

"Right," Jake said to us, a few minutes later. "Here's the plan, I bring the wood to the stream here." He pointed upstream. "Float it down, you pull it out on your side."

"I don't fancy wading in," I said.

"Just hook it with the hoe and rake from the shed. Should be a doddle."

"But we can't burn the wood if it's sopping wet," Dan objected.

"It will soon dry out."

"In front of a fire?"

"Why not?" Jake had missed the sarcasm in my voice.

Dan had other concerns. "Are you going to wade across? The stream doesn't look that deep but I can't see the bottom."

"I wasn't school long-jump champion for nothing. Watch!"

Jake took a deep breath, pounded down the rough path, and launched himself into space. He easily made the far bank but as he landed, upper body slightly forward, his feet slipped backwards in the mud. He fell spread-eagled face down in a recently deposited cow pat. We hadn't noticed any beasts in the field yesterday.

I don't think Jake really appreciated our applause. Browned off probably described both his mood and appearance.

Goliath the naked statue

"Hey, have you seen that Rag's been re-instated?" Dan said, waving the student broadsheet, *Llais y Castell*, which appeared more or less fortnightly in term time.

"I didn't know that *Llais* had been suspended," said Dicky, unenthusiastically.

"No, no, not the paper, you moron, Rag Week!"

"What's that?" I enquired innocently.

Dan seemed quite astonished at my ignorance. "You don't know? It's a fund-raising week when students do all sorts of daft things in the name of charity. Every college has one."

"Except *Tencastle*," observed Sunny.

"Yes, that's the point," replied Dan. "Seems we used to have one until a few years ago."

"So what happened?" I asked.

Dan scanned the paper. "It says here that Rag was banned by the college authorities under pressure from the *Mavoress*."

"Why?"

"Goliath had an erection."

Dan had our undivided attention.

"Go on!"

"Some boffin students had got massive sponsorship by proposing to fit Goliath with a prosthetic, operated by a sensor when anyone approached his plinth. Unfortunately the *Lady Mayoress* had chosen Goliath as a backdrop for a photo call with the local MP. Seems she got too close!"

"Made her day, did it?" chortled Dicky.

"Not exactly. Particularly when the caption *Mayoress meets the member for Tencastle* appeared in the local newspaper under a photo of Goliath's giant todger dwarfing the daffodils in Her Worshipful's hat"

"I take it she was not amused," I said.

Recycling

"That's Benji, isn't it?" said Dan. There was no mistaking the shock of black hair, even from a rear view.

"What's he got under his arm?" Jake said, leaning forward from the back seat.

"Looks like a bicycle frame," I said, as I passed by Benji and pulled Jessica to the side of the road several yards beyond.

He opened the passenger door. "Hey, man! That's real cool! I'm knackered!"

"Wheels drop off, did they?" asked Dan.

Benji ignored him.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked

"Cyclic rejuvenation still life sculpture, man!"

If Jake had said it I'd have been certain he was taking the piss.

"I meant now. You're welcome to a lift but not your scrap metal."

Benji looked pained, "Aw, man! It's got to come with me. Someone might nick it, else."

"Ride off into the night with it, you mean?" said Dan unsympathetically.

"Hang on, Rob, couldn't we put it on the roof?" Jake suggested.

"I haven't got a roof rack, in case you hadn't noticed."

"We could tie it on."

"With?" I asked sceptically.

"No problem," said Jake. "Hop out of the car, Dan, and give me your belt."

"What!"

"Your belt." Jake was already following Dan out of the car and unstrapping his own belt. "Benji, lay the frame on top of this coat." He flung his raggy jacket over the car roof. "I hope you gave Jessica a wash," he said to me.

Right now I was more concerned about scratches to her body than her cleanliness.

"Right, Dan, now loop your belt round the frame and bring in the ends. I'll do the same on this side. Oh bugger!"

Traffic is quite light on the Penybont road, but the Saturday bus, full of shoppers returning from Tencastle, chugged up just as Jake's jeans slid down.

Morris Matters

Jake, of course, was not fazed by the spotlight, in fact being the centre of attention always racked him up a gear.

“Ladies and gentlemen of ...” he paused, ever so briefly, the name of the hamlet having escaped his notice, “this fair land, I bring you the amazing Carpiog Morris, with their demonstration of ancient pagan rituals that have lain hidden in the annals of history since time immemorial. Not since the days of Owain Glyndwr have the people of Pembrokeshire witnessed the symbolism and splendour of these dances from the Welsh Border.”

“Whose Owain whatisname?” whispered Dan.

“God knows. He’s really laying on the bullshit tonight,” I replied quietly.

“And now, for our first dance!” Jake’s elegant sweeping bow brought another round of applause.

If Jake’s eloquent introduction raised the expectation of the audience, it also served to get our adrenalin flowing. We really laid into each other with the sticking! Just as well I’d brought the spares with me, as the second dance also sent the frayed end of a stick into the crowd, to huge roars of encouragement to thrash each other with even more fervour.

Acutely aware that our entire repertoire would not sustain a show longer than half an hour at the outside, Jake sought to milk the occasion for all it was worth, interspersing instrumental solos from Huw, “Who will delight you with mystic music drawn from the bards and played on this traditional instrument fashioned from the stomach of a sheep.”

“Isn’t he getting confused with a haggis?” Dan said.

“Probably. Hope there’s no-one listening that’s got a clue what it’s really all about.”

We rounded off our show with the Upton stick dance, for us the most technically difficult, but executed dynamically and with a modest degree of accuracy. No matter, the crowd loved it.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, we give you the opportunity to partake in these age-old traditions, and perpetuate the magic of Morris in ensuring long health, wealth and fertility.”

“I suspect Rud’s removing them of their wealth,” Dan observed, as the collecting pot was brandished once again to the throng of people preparing to claim their share of longevity or fecundity.

Cliffhanger

We climbed a path which continued some distance along the cliff top.

"Hey, guys, hold on a tick!" Min called. "I forgot to take any photos!" She rummaged in her rucksack and brought out her old Kodak instamatic.

"Would you like me to take your photo?" offered Dicky. He dropped back from where we'd halted several yards further on.

"Would you?" Min handed over the camera and stepped back.

Whether she caught her heel against a rock or slipped on the mud, I don't know, but I saw her fall backwards, grasping desperately at the grass as she disappeared over the cliff. We ran back down, her screams followed by brooding silence.

Dicky was still holding the camera, in a state of shock. Jake prostrated himself and peered over the cliff edge, calling her name.

"Christ, she's not moving!" he yelled.

"Min!" I called, positioning myself beside Jake. I could see her motionless body where it lay on a grassy ledge perhaps forty feet below and perilously close to a vertical drop to jagged rocks on the foreshore. One leg stuck out at an unnatural angle.

"Rob, get back to the car, find a telephone and call the coastguards! Dan you go with him, and bring back that length of rope. I'm going to see if I can reach her either from here or below."

"Jake, take care, we don't want two de ..." I bit my lip, "two casualties." I tried not to think of the worst.

"Just go!"

We ran up the path and track as fast as we could, hearts pounding with foreboding and the exertion, even though the distance was probably less than half a mile.

Dan grabbed the rope – not that I thought it would be anywhere near long enough to serve any useful purpose – and I flung myself in the driver's seat, praying that Jessica would, for once, start on the first pull. There was the odd farm building dotted around, but I hurtled Jessica along the road to the village where I could be certain of calling for help. I screeched to a halt outside a post office, attracting the attention of a postman collecting mail from the nearby box.

"Girl over cliff!" I called at him, "Is there a phone box in the village?"

"Just along the road, sir, opposite the pub."

Moby Dick

We stood as Dr. Melville O. Bedford-Dickson made his grand entrance. In full academic gown now complete with kingfisher-blue hood, over his usual dark pinstripe suit and wing collar, he mounted the steps, head aloof, like a peer of the realm. Following discreetly, Moira Bunn, the senior mistress, looked more like a private secretary to his lordship in her usual attire of pale blue trouser suit. The Head nodded to Tim Pintwhistle, the music teacher and Bob Dylan lookalike, to lead in to the first carol on the piano. The service was conventionally predictable; carol, reading, carol and so on, with a procession of pupils from different year groups carefully chosen no doubt for their lack of nerves on the big occasion and clarity of delivery.

As we sat down after the eighth carol, John took its message to 'Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' to heart. "Time for a kip," he said softly, "Headmaster's sermon on the mount."

Sure enough, the Headmaster approached the lectern, puffed out his chest and drew himself up to his full height.

"I am proud," he began, "to be the Head of one of the most distinguished schools of Wales..."

John spluttered and barely managed to disguise a loud guffaw in a fit of coughing. Mark blew his nose loudly and Luke was finding it difficult to keep a straight face. Even Nick couldn't hold back a smile. There was a low murmuring and fidgeting from the body of the hall and only 'Eleanor' Rigby's piercing stare dared any youngster to laugh outright.

What else Dr M. O. Bedford-Dickson said about his school of Wales no-one remembered or cared, and it was fortunate that only one carol followed. As the pupils filed out it was like releasing the steam from a pressure cooker.

"Good on yer, Moby!" chortled John, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes as we entered the staffroom. "Best end to a term yet. God, I nearly peed myself in there!"

Two men in a boat

"He's embarrassed?" Sunny giggled.

"That I don't believe!"

"It's true." Dan too was enjoying himself at Jake's expense.

Jake munched on a Bath bun. Whatever he'd done he knew his warning glare wouldn't stop the deed being described to maximum effect.

"Well?"

"We found a boating lake," Sunny said.

"Like, a lagoon or tributary, you know," Dan continued. "Only twenty pence an hour, which we were persuaded by you-know-who was unbelievable value."

"They took it in turns to row me," Sunny added.

I visualised several possible scenarios, mostly on the theme of being upstream without a paddle, but I wasn't even close.

"Anyway," said Dan, "we'd been out nearly half an hour when Jake's third pint started working its way through."

"Busting for a pee, I was," Jake grunted.

"Well, what could we do? Nowhere to get ashore, he couldn't stand up for fear of capsizing, and with Sunny on board ..."

"So what did you do, Jake?"

He wouldn't say, just rested his chin on his hands.

"I lent him the Sunday supplement," said Sunny.

"Which he rolled up to cover his whatnot, and aimed over the side of the boat."

"What, standing?"

"No, no, sort of kneeling on the seat while we leant to the other side to balance."

"That doesn't sound embarrassing."

"No, but just as Captain Codpiece started bailing out his bladder the boat drifted past a clearing full of a group of birdwatchers with their binoculars and cameras. Christ, I nearly wet myself!" Dan chortled.

If he'd had a fair skin, Jake's face would have been bright red. Again.

Cupid's Dart

Over the past month or so she'd taken up with a burly rugby forward, who, according to Llais y Castell, had been hospitalised with a crushed testicle after an ill-tempered needle match with arch rivals Lampeter. On an impulse, with the opposition partly neutralised, so to speak, I scribbled a message on a sheet of foolscap, folded it into a paper dart and launched the missile, and my hopes, towards Kissy's heart.

To avoid obvious eye encounter, I ducked behind the wooden panelling of the balcony whilst my cupid's arrow sped downwards, so I didn't actually follow the dart's progress. Raising my head carefully a few moments later, I smiled in anticipation as I saw Kissy glance upwards, and a short time afterwards gather her books together and depart.

later that evening ...

"Hello, Rob."

I recognised the 'Ooh Aarrh' accent. "Oh, hi there, Liz. I was just ..."

Liz Burke had been a surprising hit as Mother Wayles in Jake's rag production, since when she had politely declined his invitation to her to join Carpiog Morris, and had once more tended to keep her own counsel. She brushed away her long, mousy hair from her moon-like face with a pudgy hand.

"I'm sorry I'm late ..."

"Sorry?"

"You must have been getting tired of waiting."

"I ... er,"

"I wasn't sure what to wear. The invitation didn't say." She gave an embarrassed little giggle and blushed.

"The invitation ...?" But I already knew before she produced a familiar sheet of multi-folded foolscap from her handbag. With an unflattering surname and a solid figure unlikely to ever grace a Pirelli calendar, she would not have ignored Cupid's arrow.

"This is from you, isn't it?" A look of concern clouded her face.

My few cryptic words 'Tonight. Goliath, 7.30. If you're free. R.' I could not deny it.

"Ye...es, but ..."

"Oh, it is so kind of you to ask me, Rob." She gushed on, unaware that I'd suddenly gone slack-jawed. "What a bolt from the blue it was, you're quite a surprising person, you know."

All extracts taken from the final print-ready pdf file