

Fflur Dafydd

Elsewhere

I will always remember it as the night of Mr Huws and the hands. It is often difficult to determine which event gave rise to the other, but one thing is certain: I would not have been weeding in my back garden at four in the morning if it hadn't been for Mr Huws's disruption. When a pair of hands came to view in the soil, the only sound to be heard was the sound of a frenzied man, dressed in pale blue pyjamas, violently tooting his car horn. I resented the sound for several reasons, primarily because it trespassed on a certain moment of clarity I had achieved only seconds before, that sudden understanding of the little things that isolate a person. This aborted thought left me in mourning for something I couldn't quite remember, and with a feeling of resentment towards my otherwise genial neighbour.

Peeking through his car's sweat-clouded window a few minutes later, I saw Mr Huws's pink, balding crown being hurled again and again on the wheel – *beep! beep! beep!* – the pale blue pyjamas rustling against the black leather seats and the night's shadows dancing across his scalp. I knocked. The window became a blur of movement; pink, black, paleblue, pink, black, pale-blue. I knocked once more. "You can knock all you like," shot a voice from the still night, "it won't make the blindest bit of difference."

I turned to see his wife slumped in a garden chair, her eyes sliding onto the red, worn fabric of her cheeks. Those eyes reflected years spent

knocking on car windows.

I too, had become slowly accustomed to Mr Huws's lunar obsessions. A month ago, when the moon had slid casually from behind its dark veil, I found him on my roof, raging at the skies, wildly questioning how best to communicate with the moon's obstinate, legless, presence. It wasn't only in the skies, it was inside him, he swore, bulging beneath his eyelids, lighting up his dreams. It really had become quite a nuisance, he quipped.

But then, so had Mr Huws. I watch the usual flood of neighbours seep over the concrete. The street's only complete family are the first to arrive; Perdita, the policewoman who never even eats a piece of toast without knowing its legal implications, and her hurricane of a house-husband, whose name has become lost between the banalities of school fetes and parents' meetings, and who is mainly to be seen rushing about in a whirl of familial activity, dropping his glasses, children, and groceries. Tonight, they each have one child placed carefully over their shoulders. When Perdita has finished assessing the legal severity of the situation, she peels the child from herself and places it on the Hurricane's shoulder, where it fits perfectly like a piece of Lego. She walks casually, and yet intently, towards the car. Even in her dressing gown, Perdita is a serious policewoman.

"Are you aware, Mr Huws," she asks, sharpening her vowels like knives, "that you are committing an extremely serious offence?"

As he sounds his horn in defiance, I see Marina, one of my fellow teachers, emerging suddenly from a dark corner, like an apparition. Marina is different

to the other teachers. When I first shook her hand, I felt my skin rising like dough to meet hers. I hoped we would be friends. I had imagined all sort of friendly escapades; sitting together in the late July sun, drinking homemade tomato wine, mocking the stunted vocabulary of our fellow workers, cooking elaborate meals laced with continental vegetables and coconut milk, all the while laughing warmly together at the absurdity of the world in which we lived, and getting to the very root of exactly what it is that isolates a person. It was I who recommended the street to her, back in the day when Mr Huws was a sweet old man who did the gardening on Wednesday and who flushed beetroot-blue whenever a woman looked his way.

Marina's second night of settling in, however, had been spent trying to get Mr Huws out of her chimney. "Don't you talk to me like that young lady," he spat at her, "I'm doing you a favour. You don't want the moon's bum rubbing your window all night, do you?" Since then, Marina's eyes had never again met mine.

I can see her now, standing in the middle of the street with her blonde hair turning a sharp white in the moonlight. Nauseously beautiful, viciously wonderful.

"Marina! How are you?"

"O hi Melissa. Didn't see you there." She is wearing a cream coloured poncho, her face powdered by the moon. I feel I should run my fingers through her, to see if she is real at all.

“How are you getting on at school?” I ask, knowing full well that she is nothing but conscientious, dedicated, and popular. “How are you finding the children?”

“They’re fine. You will always come across some tearaways of course, but nothing I can’t cope with. Isn’t it cold? I think I’ll go back to bed.”

And with one swift movement, she aims a cricket-ball-sized full stop at my forehead.

Intrigue dwindles, the street empties. Mr Huws falls asleep with his head on the horn, and his lunar call resounds throughout the night. Mrs Huws loses herself in her loose sheets, Perdita rants about the tactical faults of neighbourhood committees while the Hurricane sweeps fleshily over her, and Marina burns her tongue on her strawberry tea.

While I become engrossed in a little early morning weeding, discovering a pair of hands in my back garden.

The following morning, Mrs Huws calls by. It is always her who does the apologising. Her husband awakes each morning with a clear conscience and an unruffled mind, with no awareness whatsoever of his lunar activity. He insists on having had the best night’s sleep in years, and having always reached his bed by dawn, he has no reason to believe otherwise. He wakes, yawns, and turns to face his wife, surprised to see the dewy remnants of fear and confusion at the corners of her eyes. Putting it down to general inertia at the thought of yet another day of a floundering

marriage, he sits up, rubs his eyes, and says: "There's nothing like a hot egg to start the day."

The cold glare of each and every neighbour he puts down to antipathy: "It's always been such an anti-social street," booms his voice from beyond the garden wall.

Mrs Huws now stands in my door frame, with a face like a broken car window. "I'm truly sorry about last night," she says, as her false teeth bob insecurely on the crest of her tongue, "you know how he is. He truly has no recollection of it. And well, it only happens once a month."

"But he's getting worse, Mrs Huws...."

I suddenly imagine Mr and Mrs Huws as a young couple on their first outing, on a deserted, windy beach somewhere, shivering with love and beauty, their hair wet and salty against their shoulders. For better, for worse, echoes the sea. My heart slip-slops away with the tide.

"I understand this is difficult," I add, "and of course I don't blame you or your husband for it....but..."

She quickly pockets the word 'understand.' It's all she needs. I see her walking on towards the next house, preparing those cold, glazed eyes for the task ahead. I notice that her walk is also designed to be disarming.

Just as I am about to close the door, I see Marina. I call her name. I don't know why I do this. The voice comes from some mysterious white space

within me, and I feel for the first time a strange, distant presence within myself. One that desperately wants her to come in, to have her share in my rare and precious find.

She raises her eyes. She looks at me for a second, smiles, and begins to walk over. At last, I think, at last. Then, suddenly, the smile shatters on the concrete.

“Oh sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

It isn't every night that someone finds a pair of hands in their back garden. I should have been grateful, in many ways, to Mr Huws for the fact that I happened to be weeding with such ferocity in the first place. My decision was merely to absorb the information, and to keep it to myself. They looked so much like lilies that I thought they must belong there, as a small part of a far greater creation. It would be a crime to uproot them. There was something so familiar about them. Something that I couldn't name or express but which rested there lazily, on the tip of my tongue, without any desire to launch itself into the open air.

Slowly, carefully, I covered them up again.

It is lunchtime in the staffroom. I eavesdrop on a glorified version of last night's events.

“He is an absolute lunatic...if you pardon the pun...and he has this pathetic little wife who comes round apologising, licking arses, telling us he doesn't

remember a thing, it's so very convenient..."

Her devotees, three milky-grey men and two duck-faced women, laugh uproariously.

"Leave it to the police," says Mathematic Molly, as she fondles her breasts in front of Phil the Physicist. "Do you think one's bigger than the other?"

Phil's eyeballs clunk to the floor like marbles.

"There's a policewoman in the neighbourhood. It's a nuisance."

"Shouldn't that make things easier?" queried Gorilla. No one knew what subject he taught.

"She doesn't have any real authority. Not at that time of the morning."

"Policewomen are so....so *taxing*, aren't they?" comments Cybernetic Cynthia, as the information draughts through the empty corridor of her mind.

The bell rings.

That evening, while I was tending to the hands, Mr Huws's head popped up pink over the garden wall. It was too late to think up a story, I had been caught out.

"Melissa," he growled, as though he were about to scold a flower-thief, "are you going to tell me what's going on here? I've been watching you, you

know. For weeks on end. Kneeling there. Staring at that spot.”

I want to say something to change this moment. I yearn for a single word, with the weight of the sky, to crush Mr Huws into the ground.

“Don’t you see them?” The sentence drips pathetically from my lips.

“I think that what you’re doing counts as very suspicious behaviour. I think I’m going to have to report it.”

It was only a matter of time, therefore. Within the space of a few hours, I would be forced to view things differently; to see a pair of hands in my back garden as an unnatural thing, a thing to generate speculation and curiosity, doomed to be discussed blandly and disinterestedly over mashed potatoes on a Thursday night. Rousing stifled laughs in the staffroom. No one would understand that they were a part of my life. That I could feel them stroking my hair in between dreams, those white palms caressing my face, welcoming me to each bright new day. That I heard them uprooting themselves nightly, creeping around in the shadows together like some white, eyeless creature. Guarding me from the night’s nightmarish nuns, and the dusk’s deadly dolls.

The following afternoon, the garden was full of unwanted guests. Mrs Huws was offering parsnip soup over the garden wall, Perdita was investigating in her usual meticulous manner, and the Hurricane and his children were playing pin-the-tail-on-a-neighbour. Mr Huws had his head to the ground. Marina watched the pantomime mutely from her upstairs window.

The absence of the hands troubled me.

“What exactly are we looking for?” asked Perdita, poking the soil with her silver stick. “It’s a crime to give misleading information you know.”

“Henry saw her digging something up,” said Mrs Huws, self-righteously.

“I saw her digging something up.” Mr Huws’s face was ablaze with annoyance.

We all stared at the still, intact soil.

“It could have been a body,” said the Hurricane-husband. Everyone stares at him, as though ‘body’ were a foreign word. Perdita laughs.

“A body! Ha ha! What to do with these house-husbands, I ask you? Too many daytime murder-mysteries, I suspect! Don’t you think you should be getting on with something more constructive? Like dinner perhaps?”

She gives his bottom a reverberating slap, before chasing the rest of her family out of the house with her silver stick.

“You’re up to something, my girl,” shouts Mr Huws in my face, “and I’m going to find out what it is, just you watch me.”

He slams the door like an accusation.

Mrs Huws asks for her mugs back; and once more, I claim the garden as my own.

It was dark by the time Marina came. It was obvious from her strange, horizontal posture in the door frame that curiosity had triumphed over her disgust; as though she believed her hatred to be less visible at an angle.

I pronounce her name like it ought to be pronounced. As though my mouth were full of salt.

“Well, can I come in?”

The moon is above, the lawn shimmers silver. They're back again. As pure as ever. I see them reaching for light, clasping together in silent prayer. She kneels before them. I imagine this to be the start of things. Soon, she will accept my offer of a cuppa, we will both kick off our slippers and sit on the lawn discussing the incongruities of the education system. And wonder at those things that isolate a person.

But my dream melts, hideously, like plastic shoes on a radiator.

“There's nothing there,” she said, rising to meet my gaze.

“What do you mean there's nothing there?” The shoes congeal, harden. Again I feel the tug from that secretive, hidden, white space within.

“I mean, there's nothing there. You made it up. For attention. To get

people to like you.”

I take one, slow, step forward. From the corner of my eye, I see something that amazes me. I see those white hands dancing, coming alive, shooting up from their bed. And at that moment, it all seemed to make perfect sense. At last, I knew to whom the hands belonged. I knew why they were there, and what would be the end of my story. I knew exactly what those little things were that isolate a person.

At that moment, Mr Huws jumped on the wall. His lunar activity had reached its peak once more. He had a loudspeaker in his hand and was shouting “Death becomes her! Death becomes her!” crashing off the concrete walls, while the Hurricane was punching in and out of his wife, while their two children nibbled white chocolate mice by the light of a torch, and while Mrs Huws lay dreamily adrift on her living room armchair. All while Marina moved closer and closer and closer to the white, energetic hands behind her, close enough for them to grip her ankles. And there was something in their touch that was far too familiar.

Her scream was drowned by Mr Huws’s declaration that he would become the moon’s kitchen hand.

“And then she just said, sod you all! I won’t stay here a moment longer. I can’t cope this. And off she went. Packed that very night, and left. It seems so dramatic doesn’t it? Leaving your home and job just because of one lunatic – if you’ll pardon the pun. I think she just wanted attention, really. Wanted people to like her.”

My devotees, three milky-grey men, and two duck-faced women laugh uproariously.

“I always thought she was a bit odd,” confessed Mathematic Molly, rubbing her legs in front of Phil the Physicist.

“Do you think it’s better to shave or wax, Phil?” Phil’s eyes veer like a pendulum.

“Did she say if she was coming back?” asks Gorilla, disinterestedly.

“She said this was the worst place she’d ever been to. She would rather live...elsewhere.”

“Well,” sighed Cybernetic Cynthia, locking her smile in her lap-top, “that wouldn’t be a great loss, would it?”

The bell rings.

I walk towards the door of the staffroom. When I see my own hand on the door handle, I can’t help but think about another pair of hands, those that enabled my crime. Those hands now buried deep in the soil, forever hidden from view. Complete at last. The fusion of black and white, the perfect blend. And once again, I convince myself that what I did was perfectly logical. They were, after all, her hands. They belonged to her, and she belonged to them.

I had worked it all out that night. The fact that maybe the hands hadn't existed at all until I knew their true purpose, that they were merely a symbol of something else. The sudden arrival of the unfamiliar in the familiar, was that not, after all, the very essence of that which isolated a person? I didn't feel guilty. Mr Huws didn't remember a thing the next morning, and had made perfectly evident his joy at Marina's sudden, unexplained departure. I saw myself as a nocturnal crusader, therefore, being forced to do what was necessary in order to restore harmony to the community. Marina had merely served her purpose, and she had clarified mine. It was a completely rational act. It made perfect sense.

As much sense as a pair of hands in your back garden.